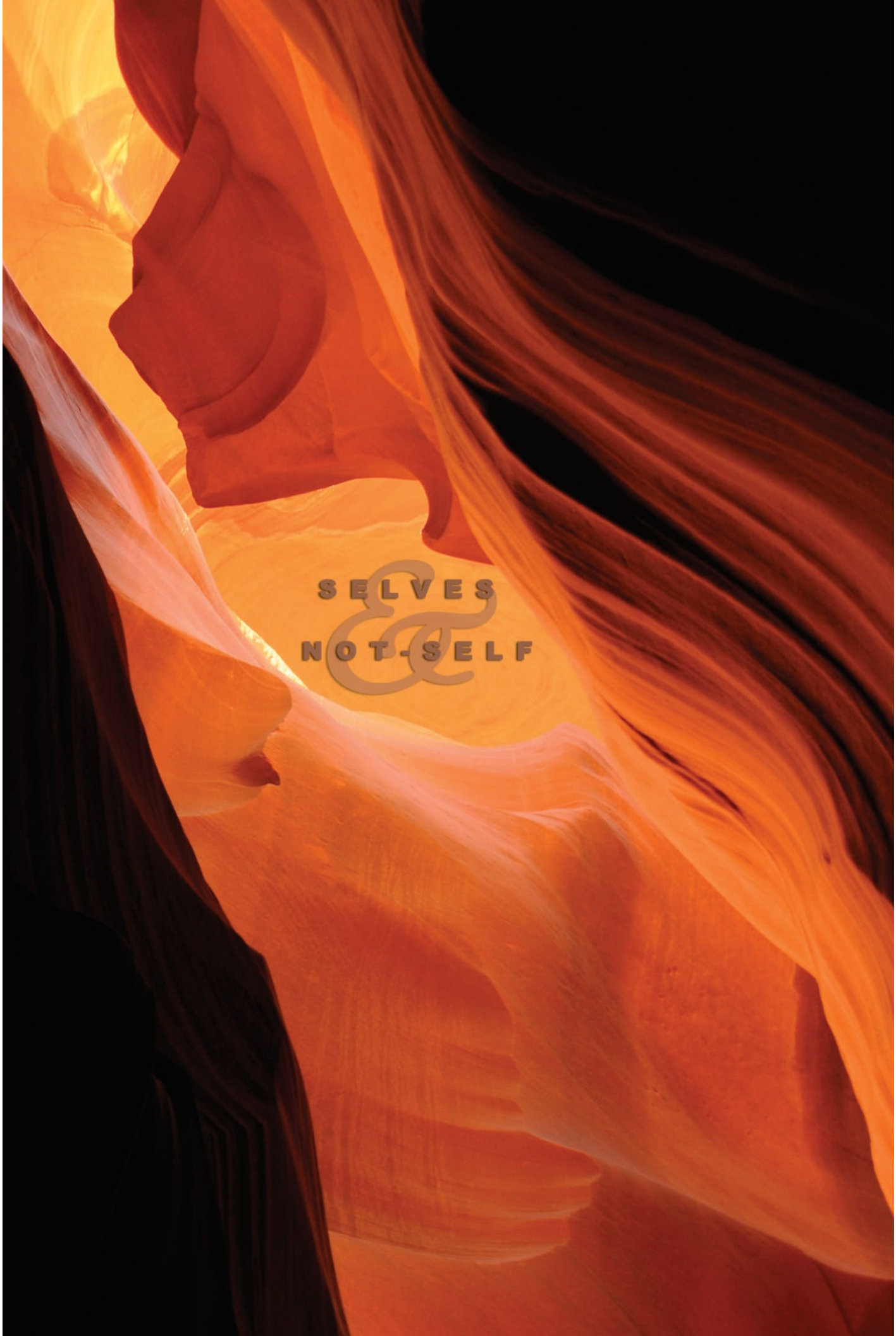
SELVES
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NOT-SELF

Selves

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Not-self

THE BUDDHIST TEACHING ON ANATTĀ

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

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"Whatever is not yours, let go of it.
Your letting go of it will be
for your long-term welfare & happiness."
—MN 22

Preface

In May of this year, members of Le Refuge, a Buddhist group located in Eguilles, near Aix-en-Provence, invited me to lead a ten-day retreat on the topics of breath meditation and *anattā*, or not-self. The retreat provided me with the rare opportunity to gather my thoughts on the topic of not-self under one framework. The result was a series of eight evening talks; edited transcripts of these talks form the body of this book.

The talks draw on passages from the Pāli Canon and on the writings and talks of the ajaans, or teachers, of the Thai forest tradition, in which I was trained. For people unfamiliar with the Canon, I have added passages from the discourses at the back of the book to flesh out some of the points made in the talks. These are followed by a glossary of Pāli terms.

For people unfamiliar with the Thai forest tradition, you should know that it is a meditation tradition founded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century by Ajaan Mun Bhuridatto. The other ajaans mentioned in the talks trained under him. Of these, Ajaan Fuang and Ajaan Suwat were my teachers. Ajaan Fuang, although he spent some time training directly under Ajaan Mun, spent more time training under one of Ajaan Mun's students, Ajaan Lee.

Many people have helped with the preparation of this book. I would like to thank the people of Le Refuge who made the retreat possible, and in particular Betty Picheloup, the founder of the group, and Claude LeNinan, my excellent and meticulous interpreter throughout my stay in Provence. Here at Metta, the monks at the monastery helped in preparing the manuscript, as did Michael Barber, Alexandra Kaloyanides, Addie Onsanit, Ginger Vathanasombat, and Josie Wolf.

A French translation of the all the talks and question-and-answer sessions during the retreat is currently in preparation. If you are

comparing the talks here with their French equivalents, please be aware that the French is based on transcriptions that are closer to the original talks than are the versions presented here.

Ṭhānissaro Bhikkhu
(Geoffrey DeGraff)

Metta Forest Monastery
August, 2011

TALK 1

Strategies of Self & Not-self

May 21, 2011

The Buddha's teaching on *anattā*, or not-self, is often mystifying to many Westerners. When we hear the term "not-self" we think that the Buddha was answering a question with a long history in our culture—of whether there is or isn't a self or a soul—and that his answer is perverse or confusing. Sometimes it seems to be No, but the Buddha doesn't follow through with the implications of a real No—if there's no self, how can there be rebirth? Sometimes his answer seems to be No with a hidden Yes, but you wonder why the Yes is so hard to pin down. If you remember only one thing from these talks, remember this: that the Buddha, in teaching not-self, was not answering the question of whether there is or isn't a self. This question was one he explicitly put aside.

To understand why, it's useful to look at the Buddha's approach to teaching—and to questions—in general. Once he was walking through a forest with a group of monks. He stooped down to pick up a handful of leaves and told the monks that the leaves in his hand were like the teachings he had given. As for the leaves in the forest, they were like the knowledge he had gained in his awakening. The leaves in his hand covered just two issues: how suffering is caused and how it can be ended **[§1]**.

After his awakening, the Buddha could have talked about anything at all, but he chose to talk on just these two topics. To understand his teachings, we have to understand not only *what* he said about suffering and its end, but also *why* these topics were of utmost importance.

The purpose of his teachings was to help people find true happiness. He didn't assume that all beings are inherently good or inherently bad, but he did assume that they all want happiness. However, they tend to be bewildered by their suffering, so they need help in finding a way to genuine

happiness. In fact, this sense of bewilderment gives rise to one of the mind's most primal questions: "Is there anyone who knows how to put an end to this suffering?" **[§2]** The Buddha's teachings are a direct response to this burning, gut-level question, providing people with something they desperately want and need: advice on how to end their suffering. In other words, the Buddha chose to share the most compassionate knowledge he could provide.

Because people have trouble thinking straight when they're suffering, they need reliable instruction in what really is causing their suffering, and what they can do to put an end to it, before they can actually find the way out of their suffering and arrive at true happiness. And it's important that these instructions not introduce other issues that will distract them from the main issue at hand.

This is why the path to true happiness begins with right view, the understanding that helps clear up the mind's bewilderment. Right view is not just a matter of having correct opinions about why there's suffering and what can be done about it. Right view also means knowing how you gain right opinions by asking the right questions, learning which questions help put an end to suffering, which questions get in the way, and how to use this knowledge skillfully on the path to true happiness. This means that right view is strategic. In fact, all of the Buddha's teachings are strategic. They are not simply to be discussed; they are to be put to use and mastered as skills so as to arrive at their intended aim.

The Buddha understood that the issues of our life are defined by our questions. A question gives a context to the knowledge contained in its answer—a sense of where that knowledge fits and what it's good for. Some questions are skillful in that they provide a useful context for putting an end to suffering, whereas others are not. Once, one of the Buddha's monks came to see him and asked him a list of ten questions, the major philosophical questions of his time. Some of the questions concerned the nature of the world, whether it was eternal or not, finite or not; others concerned the nature and existence of the self. The Buddha refused to

answer any of them, and he explained the reason for his refusal. He said it was as if a man had been shot by an arrow and was taken to a doctor, and before the doctor could take the arrow out, the man would insist that he find out first who had shot the arrow, who had made the arrow, what the arrow was made of, what kind of wood, what kind of feathers. As the Buddha said, if the doctor tried to answer all of those questions, the man would die first. The first order of business would be to take the arrow out **[§3]**. If the person still wanted to know the answer to those questions, he could ask afterwards.

In the same way, the Buddha would answer only the questions that provided an answer to our primal question and helped put an end to suffering and stress. Questions that would get in the way, he would put aside, because the problem of stress and suffering is urgent.

Usually when we hear the teaching on not-self, we think that it's an answer to questions like these: "Do I have a self? What am I? Do I exist? Do I not exist?" However, the Buddha listed all of these as unskillful questions **[§10]**. Once, when he was asked point-blank, "Is there a self? Is there no self?" he refused to answer **[see Talk 2]**. He said that these questions would get in the way of finding true happiness. So obviously the teaching on not-self was not meant to answer these questions. To understand it, we have to find out which questions it was meant to answer.

As the Buddha said, he taught two categorical teachings: two teachings that were true across the board and without exceptions. These two teachings form the framework for everything else he taught. One was the difference between skillful and unskillful action: actions that lead to long-term happiness, and those that lead to long-term suffering **[§§4-5]**. The other was the list of the four noble truths: the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the path to the end of suffering **[§6]**.

If you want to put an end to suffering and stress, these two categorical teachings carry duties or imperatives. In terms of the first teaching, you want to avoid unskillful action and give rise to skillful action. In terms of the second, the four truths are categories for framing your experience,

with each category carrying a specific duty you have to master as a skill. You need to know which of the truths you're encountering so that you can deal with that truth in the right way. Suffering must be comprehended, the cause of suffering must be abandoned, the end of suffering must be realized, and the path to the end of suffering must be developed as a skill **[§7]**. These are the ultimate skillful actions, which means that the mastery of the path is where the two sets of categorical teachings come together.

The path begins with discernment—the factors of right view and right resolve—and discernment begins with this basic question about which actions are really skillful: "What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" **[§8]** The Buddha's teaching on not-self—and his teaching on self—are, in part, answers to this question. To fit into this question, perceptions of self and perceptions of not-self are best viewed as kamma or actions: actions of identification and dis-identification. In the terms of the texts, the perception of self is called an action of "I-making" and "my-making *(ahaṅkāra mamaṅkāra)*." The perception of not-self is part of an activity called the "not-self contemplation *(anattānupassanā)*." Thus the question becomes: When is the perception of self a skillful action that leads to long-term welfare and happiness, when is the perception of not-self a skillful action that leads to long-term welfare and happiness?

This is the reverse of the way that the relationship between questions of kamma and not-self are usually understood. If you've ever taken an introductory course on Buddhism, you've probably heard this question: "If there is no self, who does the kamma, who receives the results of kamma?" This understanding turns the teaching on not-self into a teaching on no self, and then takes no self as the framework and the teaching on kamma as something that doesn't fit in the framework. But in the way the Buddha taught these topics, the teaching on kamma is the framework and the teaching of not-self fits into that framework as a type of action. In other words, assuming that there really are skillful and unskillful actions, what kind of action is the perception of self? What kind of action is the perception of not-self?

So, to repeat, the issue is not, "What is my true self?" but "What kind of perception of self is skillful and when is it skillful, what kind of perception of not-self is skillful and when is it skillful?"

We already engage in these perceptions all of the time and have been doing so ever since we were children. We have many different perceptions of self. Each sense of self is strategic, a means to an end. Each comes with a boundary, inside of which is "self" and outside of which is "not-self." And so our sense of what's self and what's not-self keeps changing all of the time depending on our desires and what we see will lead to true happiness.

Take an example from your childhood. Suppose you have a younger sister, and someone down the street is threatening her. You want to protect her. At that moment she is very much *your* sister. She belongs to you, so you will do whatever you can to protect her. Then suppose that, when you've brought her home safely, she begins to play with your toy car and won't give it back to you. Now she's no longer your sister. She's the Other. Your sense of your self, and of what is yours and not yours, has shifted. The boundary line between self and not-self has changed.

You've been doing this sort of thing—changing the boundaries of what's self and not-self—all of the time. Think back on your life—or even for just a day—to see the many times your sense of self has changed from one role to another.

Normally we create a sense of self as a strategy for gaining happiness. We look for what abilities we have in order to gain a happiness we want. Those abilities are then ours. The hand we can use to reach for the object we want is *our* hand; the loud voice we can use to scare off the bullies threatening our sister is *our* voice. This is why the element of control is so essential to our sense of self: We assume that the things we can control are us or ours. Then we also try to think about which part of ourselves will live to enjoy the happiness we're trying to gain. These things will change depending on the desire.

Unfortunately, our desires tend to be confused and incoherent. We're also unskillful in our understanding of what happiness is. Thus we often

end up with an inconsistent and misinformed collection of selves. You can see this clearly as you meditate: You find that the mind contains many different inner voices expressing many conflicting opinions as to what you should and shouldn't be doing to be happy.

It's as if you have a committee inside the mind, and the committee is rarely in order. That's because it's composed of selves you've collected from all your past strategies for trying to gain happiness, and these strategies often worked at cross-purposes. Some of them seemed to work at a time when your standards for happiness were crude, or you weren't really paying attention to the results you were getting—as when you threw a tantrum and got your mother to give you the food you wanted. These members of the committee tend to be deluded. Some of your strategies involved doing things you liked to do but actually led to suffering—as when you hit your sister and got your toy truck back. These members of the committee tend to be dishonest and deceitful: They deny the suffering they caused. This is why your committee of selves is not an orderly gathering of saints. It's more like a corrupt city council.

The Buddha's purpose in having us master perceptions of self and not-self is to bring some clarity, honesty, and order to the committee: to teach us how to engage in these activities of perception in a conscious, consistent, and skillful way that will lead to true happiness.

It's important to understand this point, for it helps to clear up a major misunderstanding that can cause us to resist the teaching on not-self. We instinctively know that our strategies of self-making are for the sake of happiness, so when we misunderstand the Buddha's not-self teaching—thinking that it's a "no self" teaching, and that he's trying to deny us of our "selves"—we're afraid that he's trying to deprive us of our strategies for finding happiness and protecting the happiness we've found. That's why we resist the teaching. But when we gain a proper understanding of his teaching, we see that his aim is to teach us how to use perceptions of self and not-self as strategies leading to a happiness that's reliable and true. In teaching not-self, he's not trying to deprive us of our strategies for

happiness; he's actually trying to show us how to expand and refine them so that we can find a happiness better than any happiness we've ever known **[see Talk 5]**.

In terms of the Buddha's two categorical teachings, the teaching on not-self is a strategy for helping you with the duties they call for if you want to put an end to suffering and stress: helping you to avoid unskillful action in the first categorical teaching, and to comprehend stress and abandon its cause in the second. You do this in conjunction with some skillful self-strategies that help you give rise to skillful actions and to develop the path. When you master these strategies properly, they enable you to realize the end of suffering. This is why these teachings are included in the Buddha's handful of leaves.

These are the main points that I'd like to discuss for the rest of the retreat. The important point to notice as we connect these talks with our meditation is that we can view our sense of self as an activity, a process. It's something we do, and something we can learn to do more skillfully. At the same time we'll look at our sense of what's not-self—which is also an activity—and learn how to do that more skillfully, too.

When we learn to do this in the proper way, we'll arrive at true happiness, free from any suffering and stress. At that point, questions of self and not-self will be put aside. When you arrive at true happiness, you no longer need strategies to protect it—the way you do for forms of happiness that are subject to change—because it's unconditioned. It doesn't depend on anything at all. The strategy of self is no longer needed, and neither is the strategy of not-self. As Ajaan Suwat, one of my teachers, once said, when you find true happiness, you don't ask who's experiencing it, for that's not an issue. The experience itself is sufficient. It doesn't need anybody to watch over it. But to reach that point we have to learn how to develop our skill in employing both the strategies of self and the strategies of not-self. These are the skills and strategies we'll be discussing each evening during the retreat.

TALK 2

Out of the Thicket and onto the Path

May 22, 2011

Tonight I'd like to talk more about why the Buddha refused to get involved in the issue of whether there is or is not a self. This will involve discussing in more detail two of the points I made last night.

The first point is that the Buddha's teaching was strategic, aimed at leading to a specific goal: total freedom in the minds of his listeners. The second point is that, as part of this larger strategy, the Buddha had strategic reasons for putting questions of the existence or non-existence of the self aside.

Part of his teaching strategy was to divide questions into four types, based on how they should be best approached for the purpose of putting an end to suffering and stress **[§9]**. The first type includes those that deserve a categorical answer: in other words, a straight "yes" or "no," "this" or "that," with no exceptions. The second type includes questions that deserve an analytical answer, in which the Buddha would reanalyze the question before answering it. The third type includes questions that deserve a counter-question. In other words, he would question the questioner before answering the original question. And the fourth type includes questions that deserve to be put aside as useless—or even harmful—in the quest to put an end to suffering. And, as I said, the questions, "Is there a self? Is there no self?" are ones he put aside.

Here's the passage where he explains why:

> "Then Vacchagotta the wanderer went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with him. After an exchange of friendly greetings and courtesies, he sat down to one side. As he was sitting there he asked the Blessed One, 'Now then, master Gotama,

is there a self?' When this was said, the Blessed One was silent. 'Then is there no self?' The second time the Blessed One was silent. Then Vacchagotta the wanderer got up from his seat and left.

"Then not long after Vacchagotta the wanderer had left, Venerable Ānanda said to the Blessed One, 'Why, Lord, did the Blessed One not answer when asked a question by Vacchagotta the wanderer?'"

And here's the Buddha's response: "Ānanda, if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self were to answer that there is a self, that would be conforming with those brahmans and contemplatives who are exponents of eternalism [the view that there is an eternal, unchanging soul]. If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self were to answer that there is no self, that would be conforming with those brahmans and contemplatives who are exponents of annihilationism [the view that death is the annihilation of the self]. If I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is a self were to answer that there is a self, would that be in keeping with the arising of knowledge that all phenomena are not-self?"

And Venerable Ānanda said, "No, Lord."

Then the Buddha said, "And if I, being asked by Vacchagotta the wanderer if there is no self, were to answer that there is no self, the bewildered Vacchagotta would become even more bewildered: 'Does the self that I used to have now not exist?'" — *SN 44:10*

Notice that only one of the Buddha's reasons for putting these questions aside concerns the person asking them: Vacchagotta would be bewildered by the answer. The other three reasons state that *any* answer to these questions would either side with wrong views, or would get in the way of an insight that, as we will see, is an important step at an advanced stage of the path.

Also notice that the Buddha is not giving an analytical answer to either of Vacchagotta's questions, nor is he giving a counter-question, such as,

"What kind of self do you mean?" This rules out the idea that the not-self teaching is aimed at negating specific ideas of self—in other words, that the answer would depend on what you mean by "self."

However, most popular misinterpretations of the not-self teaching give just this kind of answer to these questions. In other words, "It depends on what kind of self we're talking about. Certain types of self exist, whereas other types don't." What this means is that these misinterpretations say that the Buddha didn't answer Vacchagotta's categorical question because it required an analytical answer. But as we have seen, the Buddha knew how to give analytical answers to categorical questions whenever he needed to. And he had his reasons for putting these questions on the existence or non-existence of the self aside.

But because these popular misinterpretations are so pervasive, it's important that we look at them in some detail, to see why they are misinterpretations: how they misunderstand the Buddha's approach and place obstacles in the path. Otherwise, it's all too easy for us to fall into these misunderstandings ourselves.

One misinterpretation is that the Buddha's not-self teaching is aimed specifically at negating the view of self proposed in the Brahmanical Upanishads—that the self is permanent, cosmic, and identical with God—but the Buddha is not negating the fact that we each have an individual self. In other words, he's saying, Yes, you have an individual self, but, No, you don't have a cosmic/God self.

The second misinterpretation is the exact opposite: The Buddha is negating the idea that you have a small, separate self, but he's affirming the existence of a large, interconnected, cosmic self. In other words, he's saying, Yes, you do have a connected self, but, No, you don't have a separate self.

The third misinterpretation is similar to the first, but it introduces the idea that a self, to be a true self, has to be permanent. According to this interpretation, the Buddha is affirming that the five aggregates are what you are, but these five aggregates don't really qualify to be called a self because they aren't permanent. They're just processes. In other words, No,

you don't have a self, but, Yes, you're a bunch of processes; the aggregates are what you are.

None of these interpretations fit in with the Buddha's actual teachings, or his actual approach to the question of whether there is or is not a self. They misrepresent the Buddha both for formal reasons—the fact that they give an analytical answer to a question the Buddha put aside—and for reasons of content: They don't fit in with what the Buddha actually had to say on the topic of self and not-self.

For example, with the first misinterpretation—that the Buddha is denying the cosmic self found in the Upanishads—it turns out that the Upanishads contain many different views of the self, and the Buddha himself gives an analysis of those different kinds **[§11]**. He finds four main varieties. One is that the self has a form and is finite—for example, that your self is your conscious body and will end when the body dies. The second type is that the self has a form and is infinite—for example, the view that the self is equal to the cosmos. The third type is that the self is formless and finite. This is similar to the Christian idea of the soul: It doesn't have a shape, and its range is limited. The fourth view is that the self is formless and infinite—for example, the belief that the self is the infinite spirit or energy that animates the cosmos.

The Buddha says that each of these four varieties of self-theory comes in three different modes as to when and how the self is that way. One is that the self already is that way. Another is that the self naturally changes to be that way—for example, when you fall asleep or when you die. The third is that the self is changeable through the will. In other words, through meditation and other practices you can change the nature of your self—for example, from being finite to being infinite.

Multiply the four varieties of self by their three modes, and you have twelve types of theories about the self. All of these theories the Buddha rejects. He doesn't agree with any of them, because they all involve clinging, which is something you have to comprehend and let go. This means that his not-self teaching is not just negating specific types of self—such as a cosmic

self, a permanent self, or an ordinary individual self. It negates every imaginable way of defining the self.

As for the second misinterpretation, that the Buddha is actually affirming the cosmic or interconnected self, the evidence I've already given you shows that that cannot be the case. There is also a passage in the Canon where he says specifically that the idea of a cosmic self is especially foolish **[§12]**. His argument is this: If there is a self, there must be what belongs to a self. If your self is cosmic, then the whole cosmos must belong to you. But does it? No. Does it lie under your control? No. Therefore it doesn't deserve to be called yours.

As for the third misinterpretation—that the five aggregates aren't a self because they aren't permanent, but nevertheless the five aggregates are what you are—the Buddha says repeatedly that it's not fitting to identify the aggregates as "what I am" **[§19]**. As we will see later, he explains the five aggregates as the raw material from which you create your sense of self, but that it's not skillful to think that they constitute what you are.

Another problem with this misinterpretation is that it opens the Buddha to charges of lying in the many passages where he does refer to the self in a positive way—as when he says that the self is its own mainstay. If there really is no self at all, why does he talk about it as if it exists? To get around this problem, the interpretation introduces the distinction between two levels of truth: conventional and ultimate. Thus, it says, when the Buddha is talking about self, he's doing so only in a conventional way. On the ultimate level, no self exists. The problem with this distinction is that the Buddha himself never uses it—it was introduced into the tradition at a much later date—and if it were so central to understanding his teachings, you'd think that he would have mentioned it. But he didn't.

There's also the problem that, if the aggregates were what you are, then—because nibbāna is the ending of the aggregates—that would mean that when you attain nibbāna you would be annihilated. The Buddha, however, denied that nibbāna was annihilation. At the same time, what good would be the end of suffering if it meant total annihilation? Only people who hate

themselves or hate all experience would go for it.

And as for the idea that only a permanent identity deserves to be called a self: It's not the case that the Buddha would tell you to create a sense of self around the experience of something unchanging or permanent. As we will see, at an advanced level of the practice he tells you to develop the perception of not-self even for the phenomenon of the deathless, which is something that doesn't change **[§30; see also Talk 6]**. The problem with the act of self-identification is not just that it's mistakenly focused on impermanent objects when it should be focused on permanent objects. It ultimately shouldn't be focused on anything at all, because it always involves clinging, regardless of what it's focused on, and clinging involves suffering and stress. The whole point of the Buddha's teaching is to put an end to suffering and stress.

So when the Buddha refused to answer Vacchagotta's questions, it wasn't because he had an analytical answer in mind that he couldn't explain to Vacchagotta but would perhaps explain to others. It was because, in order to avoid getting involved with issues that get in the way of putting an end to suffering, these questions deserved to be put aside no matter who asked them. In fact, there's another sutta passage that makes precisely this point: No matter who you are, if you try to answer the question, "Do I exist?" or "Do I not exist?" or "What am I?" you get entangled in views like, "I have a self," or "I have no self," which the Buddha calls "a thicket of views, a wilderness of views **[§10, §§19-20]**." The image is clear: If you're entangled in a thicket or a wilderness, you've wandered far from the path and will have trouble getting back on course.

The main point to take from all of this is that the Buddha is not interested in defining what you are or what your self is. He's a lot more compassionate than that. He wants you to see how *you* define your own sense of self. After all, you're not responsible for how he might define your self, and his definition of your self is not really your problem. But you *are* responsible for the way you define yourself, and that very much *is* your problem. When you define yourself through ignorance, you suffer, and you often cause the

people around you to suffer as well.

As a first step in putting an end to this suffering, you have to bring awareness to the process by which you create your sense of self so that you can clearly see what you're doing and why it's causing that suffering. This is why the Buddha aims at getting you to understand that process in line with his two categorical teachings. He wants you to see how your act of self-definition fits within the four noble truths, and to see when it's skillful and when it's not, so that you can use this knowledge to put an end to suffering. When it's skillful, you use it. When it's not, you regard it as not-self so that you can stop clinging to it and can put it aside **[§19]**.

It's possible to create a huge variety of selves. As the Buddha once said, the mind can take on more shapes than all the species of animals in the world **[§13]**. Think of what that means: all the whales and insects and everything in-between. Your selves are even more variegated than that. If you watch your sense of self during the day, you'll see that it continually changes its shape, like an amoeba. Sometimes it looks like a dog, sometimes a person, sometimes a heavenly being, sometimes a shapeless blob.

However, all of these ways of creating a self can be analyzed down to the five aggregates: form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. The Buddha doesn't say that these aggregates are what your self is; they're simply the raw materials from which you create your sense of self **[§14]**.

As he notes, you can create four different kinds of self out of each of these aggregates. Take the form of the body as an example. (1) You can equate the aggregate with your self—for example, you can say that your body is your self. (2) You can also say that your self possesses that aggregate—for example, that you have a self that possesses a body. (3) You could also have the idea that your self is inside that aggregate—for example, that you have a self inside the body. A few years back, I got into a discussion with my older brother about how we had visualized the soul back when we were children. We both imagined that it was something inside the body, but we had different ideas about what it looked like. Mine was less imaginative. Because the English word "soul" sounds like "sole," the bottom of your shoe,

I thought my soul looked like a glowing piece of leather in a dark space. However, my brother was more imaginative. His soul looked like a rusty can with an iron rod stuck in it. Where he got that image, I have no idea.

At any rate, those are examples of a self conceived of as being inside the body, the third way you could define a soul around the aggregate of form. (4) The fourth way that you can create a sense of self around an aggregate is to say that the aggregate lies inside your self. For example, you have a cosmic self that encompasses your body, that is larger than your body, and your body moves around within that vast self.

All of these ways of defining the self, the Buddha says, cause suffering. This is why he advises you ultimately to put them all aside. But some of them do have their uses on the path, which is why he has you develop them in a skillful way before you drop them.

So instead of getting into a discussion as to which type of self is your true self—or your ultimate self or your conventional self—the Buddha is more interested in showing you how your sense of self is an action. The adjectives he uses to describe actions are not "ultimate" or "conventional." They're "skillful" and "unskillful." These are the terms in which he wants you to understand your selves: Are they skillful? Are they not? And because skill can be understood only through mastery, the Buddha wants you to master these actions in practice.

As it turns out, each of the aggregates is also an action **[§15]**. When you take on the idea of form in the mind, there is actually a decision in the mind to take on that form. That decision is an action. Feeling is also an action, perception is an action, fabrication is an action, as is consciousness. If you cling to any of these activities, that too is an action: the act of taking delight in repeating that activity again and again.

There are three reasons why it's useful to analyze your ways of creating a self in this fashion. First, it shows that regardless of how you identify your self, it always involves clinging. Wherever there's clinging, there's also suffering and stress. This is why the ordinary way of creating a sense of self falls under the first noble truth. If the object you're clinging to changes, you

suffer from its change. Even if it changes for the better, you realize that its nature is not permanent, therefore it cannot be trusted. Even if you cling to the idea of something permanent, the idea is itself impermanent, as is the clinging to the idea. When you see the activity of creating a self in this way, it gives rise to a sense of disenchantment and dispassion, two emotions that can lead to release. That's the first reason why it is useful to think of the self as activity in this way: When you see it as an activity, it's easier to apply the perception of not-self to it so that you can end the suffering that comes from clinging to it.

The second reason for analyzing your ways of creating a self is that, as the Buddha once said, however you define your self, you limit yourself **[§§16-17]**. For example, if you have the idea that you're intrinsically bad by nature, something that's intrinsically bad can't make itself good. You would need an outside power to help you. This would discourage you from practicing. If you have the idea that you're intrinsically good by nature, you would need to explain how something intrinsically good could suffer or could cause suffering; also, if it could lose its original pure nature, then once you make it pure again, what would keep it from losing its pure nature again?

There's also the practical concern that if you believe you're intrinsically good, it gives rise to complacency. You believe that any intuition that rises up from a quiet mind is trustworthy. In this way, your idea of an intrinsically good self obscures your defilements. This is the opposite of what we sometimes hear—that our defilements obscure our intrinsically good nature—but if you believe your nature is intrinsically good, then when defilements arise in the quiet mind and you identify them as the wisdom of your innate nature manifesting itself, your belief in your intrinsic goodness has blinded you to what's actually going on.

Also there are times in the meditation when the mind comes to a great state of emptiness, space, light, and peace. If you're looking for an innately pure and good Buddha nature, you could easily decide that that's your Buddha nature. However the Buddha advises that even a great state like that

should be analyzed to see where there is still some inconstancy and stress—in other words, to see that state of concentration as the result of actions and not as an innate state. Otherwise, again, you get complacent. And as the Buddha said, complacency is the opposite of the source of goodness. The source of goodness or skill is heedfulness **[§27]**.

You also place limitations on yourself if you hold to the idea that you have no self. How could you function? How could you insist that people treat you fairly? What motivation would you have to avoid unskillful actions and to develop the skills of the path? **[§19]**

Even the idea of a cosmic self has its limitations. It prevents you from seeing how you're actually functioning in the world and how you're creating suffering through your I-making and my-making in the present moment. It also provides you with excuses for your unskillful feelings: Whatever arises in the mind is simply the cosmos acting through you, and you take no personal responsibility for it. I once heard of a woman on a retreat who discovered a strong desire for a man sitting in front of her—so strong that she couldn't stay in the same room. So she went back to meditate in her dormitory room, and there she had a realization: that this was not just her own desire, but it was the force of cosmic desire manifesting through her, and that she should just allow it to happen. When you believe something like that, it's impossible to practice. As long as you don't see that these things have their causes in your individual mind, you'll never be able to put an end to them.

Every way of defining yourself also places a limitation on yourself in the sense that your definition of who you are and what belongs to you is going to conflict with somebody else's definition of who you are and what belongs to you. The Buddha has a special term for the type of thinking that starts with the thought of self-identification, "I am the thinker." He calls it *papañca*, or objectification, and says that it lies at the basis of all conflict. When you start thinking in these terms, your thoughts turn around and bite you.

So these are different ways in which defining what you are can give rise

to limitations. When you learn how to drop these unskillful ways of creating a self—or even the idea that you have no self—you can free yourself from these limitations.

Finally, there's a third benefit that comes from looking at the creation of a self as an action: You're free to create different senses of self that you can use as tools. You use them when they're needed and you can put them down when they're not. And in fact, this is the Buddha's strategy. This is how we create a path to the end of suffering. We use conditioned things to reach the unconditioned. If you couldn't do that, you wouldn't be able to reach the unconditioned—because the unconditioned is not something that can be used. All you have to work with is conditioned phenomena.

The way you use conditioned phenomena is by learning how to master them as skills. In other words, you turn these five aggregates into a path. You can think of the aggregates as bricks that you've been carrying in a sack over your shoulder, weighing you down. But instead of carrying them, you now put them down on the ground and make them into a path.

For example, when you're in a state of concentration, the concentration is actually composed of the five aggregates. Form is your sense of the body as experienced from within, which includes the breath. Feeling is the sense of pleasure or discomfort that can come with the breath. Perception is your mental image or label of "breath" that helps you to stick with the breath and to perceive the breath energy in different parts of the body. The Buddha once said that all states of concentration—except for the very highest—depend on perception because you have to keep a perception of the object in mind in order to stay with the object. As for fabrications, they include sentences in your mind that talk about the breath or the body, evaluating and adjusting the breath, evaluating how well your concentration is going. And finally consciousness is your awareness of all of these other aggregate-activities.

When brought together into a state of concentration in this way, the five aggregates form a path. As you master this skill, you get to see how you create your sense of self around these aggregates: as the agent doing the

concentration practice, and as the person enjoying its benefits. This is why the ability to create a set of skillful selves falls under the fourth noble truth. This ability allows you to see the process of I-making and my-making in action. It allows you to understand the powers and limitations of intentional action in leading to true happiness. This understanding is what leads to freedom.

So learn to use these aggregates—and the sense of self you build around them—as tools leading to freedom instead of as burdens weighing you down.

There's a story that illustrates this principle in T. H. White's retelling of the King Arthur legend, *The Once and Future King*. In this version of the story, when Arthur is a young boy, Merlin, the magician, turns him into different kinds of animals to teach him the lessons that can be learned from animals. In the final transformation, young Arthur is turned into a badger and goes down to visit an old badger in his burrow. It turns out that the old badger is like an Oxford don, with many papers spilling out of desks and shelves filling his burrow. He's written a thesis about why man has dominion over the animals, and he reads his thesis to Arthur. His explanation is much like the creation story in the Bible, except that when God creates all the animals, he doesn't create them in different forms. He creates them all as identical embryos. Once they are created, he lines them up and announces that he's going to give them a boon. He'll allow them to change the shape of their bodies in any way they want, in order to survive better in the world. For example, they can change their mouths into offensive weapons, or their arms into wings.

However, there's one condition. Once they change their form, they have to stick with it. "So," he said, "step up and choose your tools." The different animals thought over their choices, and one by one made their requests. The badgers, being very practical, asked to change their hands into garden forks, their teeth into razors, and their skin into shields. Some of the animals made choices that were very bizarre. For example, a toad who was going to live in the Australian desert asked to swap its entire body for

blotting paper to soak up the water from the seasonal rains and store it for the rest of the year.

At the end of the sixth day, there remained only one animal who had not changed its body parts for tools. That was man. So God asked man, "Well, our little man, you have thought over your choice for two days now. Obviously, you have made a wise choice. What is it?" And the little man said, "If it pleases you, I don't want to change any parts of my body for tools. I simply ask for the ability to make tools. For example, if I want to swim, I will make a boat. If I want to fly, I will make a flying boat." God was pleased. He said, "Well done. You have guessed our riddle. I will put you in charge of all of the other animals. They have limited themselves, but you have not limited yourself. You will always have many potentials."

If we take away the theological elements of this story, we can draw a useful lesson from it about our ideas of self: If we create a fixed view of who or what we are, we limit ourselves. We keep on creating suffering and stress. But if we see that we can create many senses of self and can learn to use them as tools, we'll be in charge of our happiness. We can use these tools to bring suffering and stress to an end.

As with any tools, we have to learn how to use them well, and part of using them well is learning how and when to put them down. Otherwise they get in the way of what we're trying to do. If we carry them around all the time, they weigh us down for no purpose at all.

This is where the teaching on not-self comes in. It, too, is an activity—a strategic activity—that has to be mastered as a skill: knowing how to put down a particular sense of self when it's no longer skillful, and ultimately, when your selves have taken you as far as they can, knowing how to let go of them all.

When you understand both self and not-self as activities in this way, it's easy to see how the Buddha's teachings on this topic are answers to his basic question for fostering discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" When, through practice, you've learned how to use perceptions of self and not-self in a skillful way, you'll know for

yourself that these skills are a very effective answer to that question.

So that's the message for tonight. For the next few nights, we'll explore the different ways in which the Buddha gives us lessons in how to use perceptions of self and not-self as tools on the path.

TALK 3

Health Food for the Mind

May 23, 2011

Tonight I'd like to start looking at how we create a sense of self that can lead to long-term welfare and happiness, focusing first on the question of *why* we would need to do this.

We know that the Buddha often talked about not-self, but he also talked positively about self. He said that the self should be its own mainstay, that it should observe itself and reprimand itself when it's gone astray, and that there's a need to learn not to harm oneself. Here are some passages from the Dhammapada that speak positively of the role of self on the path.

> "Your own self is your own mainstay,
> for who else could your mainstay be?
> With you yourself well-trained,
> you obtain a mainstay hard to obtain." — *Dhp 160*

> "Evil is done by oneself.
> By oneself is one defiled.
> Evil is left undone by oneself.
> By oneself is one cleansed.
> Purity and impurity are one's own doing.
> No one purifies another.
> No other purifies one." — *Dhp 165*

> "You yourself should reprove yourself,
> should examine yourself.
> As a self-guarded monk with guarded self,
> mindful you dwell at ease." — *Dhp 379*

These passages show that a sense of self is an important part of the

practice—especially a sense of self that encourages responsibility, heedfulness, and care. The question is: Why would it be necessary to create this skillful sense of self? If ultimately you're going to develop the perception of not-self, why spend time developing a perception of self?

The short answer is that the path is a skill, and, as with many other skills, there are many different stages in mastering it. Sometimes you have to do one thing at one stage, and turn around and erase it at another. It's like making a chair. At one stage you have to mark the wood with a pencil so that you can cut it properly, but when you're ready to apply the final finish, you have to sand the pencil marks away.

The long answer begins with a fact that I mentioned last night: that the path to the unconditioned is conditioned. In the Buddha's terminology, it's fabricated. The fact that it's a fabricated path leading to an unfabricated goal means that you have to develop some fabricated qualities along the way that you'll have to let go when you arrive at the goal. Too often we focus on the goal without paying attention to the path, but it's only through focusing on the path that you can arrive at the goal. If you focus all your attention off in the distance, you won't see where you're actually stepping. You may trip and fall.

So when you focus on the fact that the path is fabricated, the first thing you have to notice is that it's something you have to put together through your own voluntary efforts. The path involves actively developing good qualities and letting go of bad qualities, and you have to will yourself to do this. To motivate your will, you need a healthy sense of self, realizing that you'll benefit from fabricating the path and that you have within you the capabilities that the path requires. Only at the end of the path, when you no longer need these forms of motivation, can you let go of every possible sense of self.

Also, the act of fabricating the path requires strength, and a healthy sense of self helps to nourish that strength. The Buddha's strategy here draws on an analogy he uses for explaining the process of suffering.

In his first noble truth, he identifies suffering as the five clinging-

aggregates. The word "clinging" here is the important part of the compound. The five aggregates are burdensome to the mind because we cling to them. Without the clinging, they would not be a burden. Now, the word for clinging, *upādāna*, also refers to the act of taking sustenance or food. The aggregates are things that we feed on, feeding both in the physical sense and in the mental sense. For example we find mental nourishment in feelings and perceptions and fabrications. So the Buddha's basic analogy for the process of suffering is the act of feeding.

He says that we feed on the aggregates in four ways. The first way is through passion for sensuality. Here "sensuality" means your obsession with sensual resolves and intentions. In other words, you cling to thoughts about sensual pleasures. You can think for hours about a sensual pleasure and how to get it—as when you plan to go out for an excellent meal—even though the actual pleasure of the meal itself may last for only a short time. The obsession with thinking about sensuality is what constitutes the clinging.

The second way that we cling to and feed on the aggregates is through our views about them—our opinions, our theories about how the world works and what issues are important to hold opinions on. The most extreme form of clinging through views believes that simply holding a view can take you to heaven or whatever, but the act of clinging to and feeding on views works in subtler ways as well.

The third way we feed on the aggregates is through our attachment to certain habits and practices. We believe that things have to be done in certain ways in order to be right. The extreme form of this clinging is ritual: The idea that simply performing an action properly, regardless of your motivation, carries a certain magical power that bends the world to your will or makes you better than other people.

To lighten the mood, I'd like to tell you a story that illustrates this particular form of attachment. It concerns a goose.

There was once a biologist in Austria who raised a baby goose whose mother had died. The baby goose fixated on the biologist and followed him

everywhere. Throughout the summer, as long as the biologist was outside, the goose would follow him around the yard of the house. When autumn came, however, the biologist knew he would have to take the goose inside. So one evening, at the time when he would normally feed the goose, he didn't feed the goose but instead walked into his house, leaving the door open behind him. The goose followed him in. Now the entryway to the house was a long hallway that led from the door to a window on the other side of the house, and halfway down the hall on the right was a stairway that led up to the second floor, which was where the biologist lived. The goose, on entering the house, immediately freaked out because it had never been inside before. It went running to the window to escape, but then discovered that it couldn't get out the window. Meanwhile, the biologist climbed the stairs and called the goose. So the goose turned around and followed him up the stairs, which is where the biologist fed him.

From that point on, every time the goose entered the house, it would go first to the window; then it would turn around and go up the stairs. As time passed, the trip to the window got shorter and shorter until finally it was simply a matter of the goose's going to the far side of the stairway and shaking its foot at the window. Then it would climb the stairs.

One evening the biologist was late coming home from work. The goose was very hungry, so as soon as the biologist opened the door it ran up the stairs. Halfway up the stairs, though, it stopped and started shaking all over. Then very deliberately it walked down the stairs, walked over to the window, turned around, and then went back up the stairs.

Sound familiar? That's clinging to habits and practices, the third way in which we feed on the aggregates. When we stay stuck on our habits and practices, we're listening to our inner goose.

The fourth way of feeding on the aggregates is through our ideas about what the self is and whether it exists or not. As we saw last night, when we cling to ideas of what we are, we get entangled in all sorts of complications.

Now, even though these four ways of clinging cause suffering, they do provide some nourishment, some strength to the mind. Otherwise, we

wouldn't bother feeding in this way. We see that the energy put into clinging is repaid by the strength we get from these activities. But as is the case with physical food, mental food can be either good or bad for you. Even though unhealthy food can give you some strength, it can also cause you health problems over the long term. The same principle applies to the mind.

One way we can think of the path is as health food for the mind. We need this nourishment to give the mind strength, for otherwise we wouldn't be able to engage in the fabrication needed for the path. Ultimately, the path will bring the mind to a level of strength where it no longer needs to feed. But in the meantime, we need mental food to develop the strength and stamina needed to bring us to that point.

So the Buddha's strategy is to use some of these forms of clinging in a skillful way as steps on the path. We have to hold to right views. We have to hold to the precepts, which are habits, and the practice of jhāna, right concentration, which counts as a practice **[§22]**. We also need to develop a healthy sense of self, which is self-reliant, responsible, and heedful. So we need to feed in these three ways. As for clinging to sensuality: This is the one type of clinging that has no role on the path, but we do require external conditions conducive to training the mind. We need a certain amount of sensory pleasure provided by food, clothing, shelter, medicine, and the pleasures of a peaceful, quiet place to meditate. We're advised not to obsess over these things, but if we haven't yet gotten to the point where we can maintain our mental center everywhere, we have to hold to the principle of searching out surroundings conducive for the practice whenever we can.

To wean the mind off its usual habit of feeding on sensuality, we have to train it to enjoy the genuine health food provided by the other means of skillful clinging. This is one of the main reasons why we have to feed it with concentration. The pleasure and rapture of jhāna help provide the sense of well-being we need in the here and now to be willing to change our diet **[§§21-22]**. And the practice of jhāna, in turn, needs to be well fed with right views and the healthy sense of self-esteem that comes from the habits of generosity and virtue. Otherwise we won't be able to endure the difficulties

inherent in getting the mind to settle down and stay there.

At the same time, as concentration develops, it provides an even greater sense of self-esteem, which ensures that when you finally do apply the perception of not-self to all phenomena in an all-around way, you don't do it with neurotic self-hatred. This is an important point because sometimes the teaching on not-self is used as an excuse for self-hatred. In other words, "I don't like myself, so I'll deny that my self exists." This is not healthy. But when you develop a healthy strength of concentration, you understand that you've taken your healthy sense of self as far as it can go. At that point you're ready for the next step in spiritual maturity. You let go for the sake of greater health. It's only then that you no longer need to feed.

But as long as the mind is on the path, it needs to feed in a discerning way on views, habits, practices, and a healthy sense of self. And as I already mentioned, the five aggregates are what we feed on. This means that we have to learn to feed on the aggregates in such a way that they become factors of the path. For instance, the second form of skillful feeding, the practice of right concentration, involves all five aggregates, as we noted last night. The first form of skillful feeding, the development of discernment in right view and right resolve, requires the aggregates of perception and fabrication. So in this way we use the clinging-aggregates as steps on the path.

The purpose of this is to develop five strengths in the mind: conviction, persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. These are the inner strengths that will bring the mind to the point where it no longer needs to feed.

As we develop a healthy sense of self to feed these strengths, we gain practical insight into how we create our sense of self. We also gain insight into our intentions. The Buddha is especially interested in having us understand the role of our sense of self as the agent that exerts control over our actions. This relates to his teaching on the role of kamma in the present moment. Our experience of the present moment is composed of three sorts of things: the results of past actions, present actions, and the results of

present actions. We have no control over the results of past actions, but we do have some freedom—some element of control—in our choice of our present actions. The question of exactly how much control and how much freedom is something that we can discover only by trying to act as skillfully as we can with each moment. This is why the topic of skillful action is one of the Buddha's most basic teachings.

We focus on learning more and more about the potentials and limitations of the freedom we have in the present moment because that is the area of awareness where the opening to ultimate freedom will be found. Now, ultimate freedom is not the same as freedom of choice. It's a freedom from suffering that's totally unconditioned, totally beyond space and time, and so has nothing to do with questions of control or no control. It's just there. But you can find it only by exploring what freedom you have to act skillfully.

This is why the Buddha doesn't encourage thoughts about essential nature: about what you are or aren't, and whether that's good or bad. He's more interested in having you see the level of freedom you can exercise around your choices in the present moment. In other words, he's not interested in having you speculate about what the self is or isn't; he's interested instead in having you watch how you define yourself with each action in the present. That's because the line between self and not-self is determined by what you can and cannot control. The more precisely you see that line, the closer you are to finding the true freedom where questions of control or no control no longer matter.

This is another reason why the Buddha has us develop mindfulness and concentration together, because you need both of these strengths acting together to observe the action of creating a sense of self or not-self around that line between control and non-control. Mindfulness is what keeps remembering where to stay focused and what to keep doing: to abandon what's unskillful and to develop what's skillful **[§22]**. Concentration is what maintains the steadiness of your gaze.

So it's only through clinging to the practice of the path that you can find

the line between control and non-control, and can observe it closely. It's only through healthy clinging that you reach the point where you can really let go and be free.

It's as if you're a bird in a cage. One wall of the cage is a door. If you cling to the other walls, you stay stuck in the cage. But if you cling to the door, then when the door is open, you can fly away.

In the same way, you cling to the path. When the path comes together, it leads to the opening where you gain freedom. The door swings open and you're free to fly wherever you want. In the words of the Dhammapada, when you've reached that point, your path—like that of birds through space—can't be traced **[§23]**. You're so free that you leave no footprints in the sky.

TALK 4

A Healthy Sense of Self

May 24, 2011

Last night we talked about the reasons *why* it's important to develop a skillful sense of self on the path. Tonight we'll talk about the Buddha's instructions in *how* to do it, and the lessons we learn from doing it well.

The self strategy that the Buddha recommends using along the path derives from the question at the basis of discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" This question contains two ideas of self. The first is the idea of the self as agent, the producer of happiness; the second is the idea of the self as the consumer of happiness. When the question says, "What, when I do it", the "I" here in "I do it" is the self as producer. The "my" in "my long-term welfare and happiness" is the self as consumer of happiness.

The idea of the self as agent also introduces the element of control, which the Buddha says is essential to any idea of self **[§18]**. This was the point he made at the very beginning of his first discussion of not-self: If you have no real control over something, how can you say that it's you or yours? It's only through the relative element of control you have over some of the aggregates that you can identify with them to begin with.

Now the Buddha has us use both the idea of self as producer and the idea of self as consumer as part of our motivation for practice. For example, concerning the self as producer, there's a passage where Ven. Ānanda tells a nun that even though we practice to put an end to conceit, it's only through a certain kind of conceit that we can actually practice **[§24]**. The conceit he's referring to is the conceit implicit in the idea, "If others can do this, so can I." This relates to our confidence—as producers of action—that we are competent to learn how to do things correctly and skillfully. This healthy sense of "I" gives us confidence that we can handle the path.

Without it, we wouldn't be able to attempt the path at all.

The Buddha also teaches us to use the idea of self as consumer as motivation for the path. There's a passage in the Canon where he's apparently talking about a monk who's getting discouraged on the path and is thinking about going back to his lay life **[§25]**. Essentially, he recommends that a monk in that situation ask himself, "Do you really love yourself? Are you going to content yourself simply with the food, clothing, shelter, and medicine of lay life even though this means staying in the cycle of birth, aging, illness, and death? Or would you really like to put an end to suffering?" The implication here is that if you really love yourself, you should try to put an end to suffering. You should care for the self that's going to be consuming the results of your actions.

So what should the self as producer do to show genuine goodwill for the self as consumer?

The traditional answers for the Buddha's question—"What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?"—fall into two classes. The first class gives specific do's and don'ts. The second class gives advice on how to determine for yourself what's the most skillful thing to do in a given situation.

In the first class, there are the practices called "acts of merit": generosity, virtue, and the development of goodwill. Each of these practices fosters a healthy sense of self.

When the Buddha teaches generosity, he emphasizes the fact that you're free to give. In fact when a king once asked him, "Who should I give things to?" the king expected that the Buddha would say, "Give to me and my disciples." Instead the Buddha said, "Give wherever you feel inspired." In other words, he encouraged the king to practice generosity as a way of exercising his freedom to choose.

The act of generosity is one of the first ways we realize that we do have freedom of choice. When you were a child, the first time you realized you had that freedom was when you gave away something you didn't need to give. It wasn't on a holiday or somebody's birthday, where you had to give

something. It was when, of your own accord, you wanted to make a gift of something that was yours. A strong sense of well-being and self-worth came from that choice. When you're forced to give, there's no special sense of self-worth. But if you give when there's no compulsion, it gives rise to a sense of self-esteem: You're not just a slave to your appetites. You have the noble heart that's willing to share pleasure with others.

Similarly with the practice of virtue, such as observing the five precepts or avoiding the ten courses of unskillful action **[§5]:** When you realize that there are ways that you could get away with harming someone, but you choose not to, it gives rise to a very strong sense of self-worth. When you're tempted to do something that's unskillful but you learn how to say No to that temptation, you realize again that you're not a slave to your defilements.

This is how the practice of virtue develops skill in learning to deal with addictive behavior. For example, suppose that you feel tempted to do something and you try to say No, part of the mind will say, "Well, you're going to say Yes in five minutes, so why not say Yes now?" You learn how to say, "No, I'm not going to fall for that trick. What I do in five minutes is not my responsibility right now. My responsibility is what I do right now." If you keep this up, you learn how to deal with all the tricks that the mind has to fool itself. This gives rise to a sense of competence and self-worth. It also gives you a lesson in the existence of choice, which is an important element on the path.

Meditation on goodwill also gives rise to a sense of great well-being and self-worth. On the one hand, it reminds you that you do deserve to find true happiness. I don't know about France, but in America many people say that they have trouble feeling goodwill for themselves. They don't feel worthy of true happiness. If you have that attitude, it saps the strength you need to follow the path. But if you can remind yourself that true happiness isn't selfish or self-indulgent—it doesn't harm anyone and it also puts you in a better position to help other people—this gives you a healthy motivation to practice.

On the other hand, the ability to extend thoughts of goodwill to large numbers of people, even those you don't like, creates a spacious sense of your own nobility—the nobility that comes from not carrying grudges or playing favorites.

All of these ways of practice give training in being more skillful and more mature in how you create your sense of "I" and "mine." At the same time, they give you practice in learning how to dis-identify with less skillful intentions, such the desire to be stingy, hurtful, or mean. In this way, you're gaining practice in developing the perceptions of self and not-self in a skillful way.

Now, the Buddha realized that simply giving instructions in generosity, virtue, and meditation would not cover every situation in life. It's important that you also learn the skills to judge for yourself what is skillful in the areas where clear-cut rules don't apply, or two good general principles would pull you in opposite directions. So he also gave instructions on how to train yourself to judge situations wisely for yourself.

I'll give an illustration of this principle. If you ever go to Alaska, you'll discover that there are bears. Most of the people who encounter bears in Alaska have no previous experience with bears. They don't understand bears' habits or the etiquette of bears. Bears do have their etiquette, you know. So, in order to train strangers in how to deal with bears, the Alaskan government used to post big signs around the state, entitled, "Bear Awareness." It's joke in English that doesn't work in French, because the word "bear" in "bear awareness" can also be "bare." The signs listed ten points to remember when encountering bears. I can't remember all ten, but the first nine gave specific do's and don'ts. For example, if you see a bear, do not run away. Even if the bear runs at you, do not run off. Instead, raise your hands so that you look large to the bear—bears have very poor eyesight—and stand your ground. At the same time, speak to the bear in a calm, reassuring voice, to let the bear know that you mean it no harm. If the bear attacks you, lie down and play dead. Usually the bear will lose interest

and walk away.

That was as far as the specific instructions took you. Then the sign told you that there's a situation where it couldn't tell you what to do—which is if the bear starts to chew on you—because the bear may have two different intentions. One, it simply may be curious to see if you really are dead. The other is if the bear is hungry. So while you're lying there with the bear nibbling on you, you have to decide which is the bear's motivation. If the bear is simply nibbling out of curiosity, continue to play dead; the bear will lose interest and walk away. However, if the bear is hungry, fight for all of your life. Poke your finger in its eyes and do whatever else you can think of to scare it away.

Now to decide the bear's motivation in a situation like that requires a lot of mindfulness and alertness.

In the same way, as you're facing your day-to-day life, there will be areas where the Buddha's instructions on generosity, virtue, and goodwill give clear guidance, and areas where they don't. In areas where they don't, you have to develop your own mindfulness, alertness, and many other skillful qualities to determine the right thing to do. This principle is so important that it was the first thing the Buddha taught to his son.

> "What do you think, Rāhula: What is a mirror for?"
>
> "For reflection, sir."
>
> "In the same way, Rāhula, bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions are to be done with repeated reflection.
>
> "Whenever you want to perform a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I want to perform—would it lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it would lead to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it would be an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then any bodily action of that sort is absolutely unfit for you to do. But if on reflection you

know that it would not cause affliction... it would be a skillful bodily action with happy consequences, happy results, then any bodily act of that sort is fit for you to do.

"While you are performing a bodily action, you should reflect on it: 'This bodily action I am doing—is it leading to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both? Is it an unskillful bodily action, with painful consequences, painful results?' If, on reflection, you know that it is leading to self-affliction, to affliction of others, or both... you should give it up. But if on reflection you know that it is not... you may continue with it.

"Having performed a bodily action, you should reflect on it.... If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful bodily action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should confess it, reveal it, lay it open to the Teacher or to a knowledgeable companion in the holy life. Having confessed it... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful bodily action with happy consequences, happy results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities.

[Similarly with verbal and mental actions, except for the last paragraph under mental actions:]

"Having performed a mental action, you should reflect on it.... If, on reflection, you know that it led to self-affliction, to the affliction of others, or to both; it was an unskillful mental action with painful consequences, painful results, then you should feel distressed, ashamed, & disgusted with it. Feeling distressed... you should exercise restraint in the future. But if on reflection you know that it did not lead to affliction... it was a skillful mental action with happy consequences, happy results, then you should stay mentally refreshed & joyful, training day & night in skillful mental qualities.

"Rāhula, all those contemplatives & brahmans in the course of the

past who purified their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions, did it through repeated reflection on their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions in just this way.

"All those contemplatives & brahmans in the course of the future who will purify their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions, will do it through repeated reflection on their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions in just this way.

"All those contemplatives & brahmans at present who purify their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions, do it through repeated reflection on their bodily actions, verbal actions, & mental actions in just this way.

"Thus, Rāhula, you should train yourself: 'I will purify my bodily actions through repeated reflection. I will purify my verbal actions through repeated reflection. I will purify my mental actions through repeated reflection.' That's how you should train yourself." —*MN 61*

Notice the qualities of heart and mind that are developed by this kind of practice.

First, it teaches you to be observant—and in particular to be observant of your own actions, their motivation and their results—because this is one area where we tend to engage in a lot of denial. The area of our motivations, our actions, and their results is the first area where we learn denial when we're children—as when we might have said, "It was already broken when I lay down on it." The Buddha here is teaching you not to develop that attitude. If you actually broke it by stepping on it, you should admit that you were the one who broke it.

The Buddha's instructions here also teach you to have a healthy attitude toward your mistakes, what we would call a healthy sense of shame, one that comes with a high sense of self-esteem. You're not ashamed of yourself as a person, but you *are* ashamed of any of your actions that have caused harm because you regard them as beneath you. This healthy shame is actually very helpful on the path because it enables you to see your

mistakes as mistakes, and it makes you want to stop making them: the first steps in being able to learn from them.

The Buddha's instructions also teach other healthy attitudes. For example, compassion: You want to make sure that your actions harm no one. Truthfulness: If you make a mistake, you should be willing to admit it to other people. Integrity: Take responsibility for your actions.

In particular, however, the Buddha's instructions here teach the most skillful sense of self to help you on the path: a self that's always willing to learn. If your sense of pride or self-worth is built on the idea that you're already good, you'll have trouble learning, and trouble admitting mistakes. But if your pride or self-worth is built on the idea that you're always willing to learn, then it opens many possibilities for developing more skill. It's the best kind of pride there is, the most useful basis for skillful I-making and my-making.

This is the kind of pride that can use a sense of shame, integrity, and all the other attitudes the Buddha is teaching here as means to negotiate with your less skillful selves, the less skillful members of the committee, and win them over to the path to true happiness. In the factors of the path, this comes under right effort: the ability to "generate desire" within yourself to do the right thing.

Finally, these instructions teach an important lesson about happiness: that it is possible to find a happiness that also offers happiness to others. In other words, your happiness does not have to depend on the pain of others. If it's gained through generosity, virtue, and goodwill, it actually fosters their happiness, too. In this way you learn not to draw a sharp line between your happiness and the happiness of those around you. And as a result you focus less on the word "my" in "my happiness," and take more interest in trying to master cause and effect: what actions actually cause happiness both for yourself and for those around you.

In this way the sense of self fades into the background and your sensitivity to cause and effect comes more to the fore. This is what enables you to get more and more skillful on the path—so that when bears attack

you, you'll be able to tell whether they're eating you out of curiosity or out of hunger. And that way you can deal skillfully with any situation you encounter on the path.

TALK 5

The Ego on the Path

May 25, 2011

Last night we discussed some of the traditional ways in which the Buddha taught a skillful sense of self—the self as the agent or producer of happiness, and the self as the consumer of happiness—through the development of generosity, virtue, and meditation on goodwill. We also talked about some of the qualities the Buddha recommends for skillfully negotiating with the less skillful members of the mind's committee and motivating them to do the right thing.

Tonight's talk approaches the same topics from a slightly different angle, looking at them in terms of what modern psychology has to say about mature ego functioning.

Sometimes you hear that the Buddha's teaching on not-self is a teaching on non-ego. This is actually a misunderstanding and it has two unfortunate consequences. The first is that, for those who like the idea of non-ego, it becomes an excuse for self-hatred and for the practice of spiritual bypassing. An example of spiritual bypassing is this: Suppose you have troubles in your life and you don't want to engage in the difficult business of trying to become more mature in dealing with others or negotiating the conflicting desires in your own mind. Instead, you simply go and meditate, you do prostrations, you do chanting, and you hope that those practices will magically make the problems in your life go away. This is called spiritual bypassing—an unskillful way of clinging to habits and practices. As you can imagine, it's not very healthy—and not very effective. People often come back from meditation retreats and they still have the same problems they had before.

The other problem in thinking that Buddhism teaches non-ego is that those who understand the healthy functions of the ego believe that

Buddhism lacks a proper appreciation of these functions. They think that Buddhist teachings are incomplete and need help from Western psychology in order to become a complete training of the mind.

Actually, the Buddha's teachings contain all the elements of healthy ego functioning. Even the not-self teaching is treated by the Buddha as a type of healthy ego functioning.

To explain these points, I'd first like to touch a little bit on Freud's teaching on the ego. Freud divided mental functions into three types. The first is the id. Id functions are basically your brute wants and desires for pleasure. The second mental function is what he called the superego. Superego functions are basically your ideas about what you *should* do—the duties you believe you ought to fulfill. These are usually ideas you've picked up from society around you: your parents, your teachers, your schools, your church. Now in Freud's belief, there is always going to be a conflict between these two types of functions. And if you were to give in totally to either id functions or superego functions, you would die. At the same time, there's an inevitable conflict between your id and the id of everyone around you. So in order to survive, you need a third type of mental function: ego functions, which try to negotiate as best as possible between these two other incompatible functions—between what you want to do and what you believe society or God or whatever demands of you.

Now, the Buddha's teachings on the functions of the mind differ from Freud's in several ways. You have to remember that when Freud was practicing in nineteenth century Europe, most of his patients had very unfriendly superegos because their ideas about what they should do had very little to do with their own happiness. These ideas mostly took the form of commands from a demanding, competitive society or from God, who could be very arbitrary and harsh. But in the Buddha's teaching, every idea about what you "should" do depends on your desire for happiness. The Buddha was not the sort of person who simply saddled you with commandments about what you should and shouldn't do. Instead, he placed a condition on his shoulds. He said that *if* you want true happiness, this is

what you need to do, based on how cause and effect work. The duties he teaches are the duties in the four noble truths: to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize the cessation, and to develop the path to that cessation. These are friendly duties because they aim at your genuine happiness.

This changes the dynamic in the mind. To follow the Buddha's version of the superego would not kill you. As a result, ego functioning in the Buddha's picture is not just a series of defense mechanisms for survival. It's actually the part of the mind that strategizes for long-term happiness: to figure out ways to get the id to listen to a superego that's been trained to be genuinely wise. Remember that question that we asked earlier in the retreat: "What, when I do it, will lead to long-term welfare and happiness?" This is the question that informs both superego and ego functioning, enabling them to work together in a friendly way.

Another difference between the Buddha's teachings and Freud's is that the Buddha sees less inherent conflict between the needs of the id and the needs of the superego. As he says, your true happiness doesn't need to conflict with the true happiness of society at large. Also, unlike Freud, the Buddha doesn't necessarily believe in brute, irrational desire. Each desire comes with its own reasoning. And although its reasoning may be weak and faulty, it nevertheless aims at happiness. At the same time, each reason of the mind is associated with its own desire, which is also aimed at happiness. Therefore there is no clear distinction between reason and desire. And because every desire is aimed at happiness, there is a common ground where all desires can begin to negotiate: to sort out which ones are more or less skillful in achieving their common aim.

This means that, from the Buddhist point of view, the functions that Freud labeled as "id," "ego," and "superego" are different ways of defining your strategies for happiness. Each is a different sort of self: The id is a foolish self that's very shortsighted. The superego is the wise self that looks for long-term happiness. And the ego is the negotiating self that tries to train the id, to reason with it so that it'll be willing to listen to the wise

superego.

When these functions are brought together in a skillful way, then—for example—the practice of generosity, virtue, and meditation brings a happiness that doesn't create clear boundaries between you and other people. Everyone benefits when you follow these strategies. In the Buddha's eyes, one of the reasons that genuine happiness is genuine is because it doesn't need to take anything away from anyone else, and can actually help contribute to other people's happiness, too.

Those are the differences.

As for the similarities, from the Freudian point of view there are five healthy ego functions: suppression, sublimation, anticipation, altruism, and humor. As I explain each of these, I'll show the ways in which the Buddha teaches all five as well.

The first one is suppression. Suppression is when you realize that a desire is unhealthy or unskillful, and you learn how to say No to it. This is different from repression. In repression, you deny that you have the desire to begin with. In suppression, you know you have the desire, but you simply learn how to say No.

In the Buddha's teachings, this principle is similar to restraint. There's a famous passage in the Dhammapada **[§26]** where the Buddha says that if you see a greater happiness that comes from abandoning a lesser happiness, you should be willing to let go of the lesser happiness in order to gain the greater happiness. This sounds very simple and commonsensical, but it's not easy to practice and many people even resist the idea of practicing it.

I have a friend who writes novels and teaches at a university. Every time she writes a new novel, she's invited to read passages from her new novel at some of the university's alumni clubs. So each time she has to choose a self-contained story from the novel to read to these groups. In her last novel, the story she chose was about a young woman in 17th century China. The woman's mother had died, and the father had promised that he would not remarry. But you know how fathers are. After two years, he did remarry.

Not only that, he married a courtesan.

Now, the courtesan was very intelligent, and she wanted to be a good stepmother to the girl. One night they were playing chess. As they were playing, the stepmother was also using the occasion to teach the daughter an important lesson in life. The lesson was this: If you want true happiness in life, you have to decide that there's one thing you want more than anything else, and that you're willing to sacrifice everything else for that one thing. Of course, the daughter was half listening and half not listening, as children often do to lessons like these, but she began to notice that her stepmother was a sloppy chess player, losing pieces all over the chessboard. So the daughter became more aggressive in her game. Well, it turned out that the stepmother had done this as a trap, and soon: checkmate. The stepmother won. And of course, the way she played chess was illustrating the lesson she was trying to teach the daughter: You have to sacrifice some of your pieces in order to win.

My friend read this story to three different groups, and then had to stop. Nobody liked the story. Now, maybe this tells you something about the attitudes of modern consumer culture, but I think that it's also a general human characteristic. We want to win at chess *and* keep all our pieces. That is not a healthy ego function. The wisdom of suppression lies in realizing this: that you have to sacrifice some things in order to gain what you really want. And this is what the Buddha teaches in restraint. If you see that any actions are unskillful, you learn how to avoid them for the sake of a greater happiness. It's a trade. That's the first healthy ego function.

The second one is sublimation. This is where, when you realize that you have an unhealthy or an unskillful desire for happiness, you don't just suppress it. You replace it with a more skillful way of finding happiness. This, in the Buddha's teaching, is precisely what concentration practice is about. If you can learn how to develop a sense of well-being, refreshment, and pleasure right here and now simply by focusing on your breath, you find it much easier to let go of unskillful desires for happiness. That's the second healthy ego function.

The third is anticipation. Anticipation is when you see future dangers and you prepare for them. The Buddha also teaches this principle in his teaching on the importance of heedfulness, which is essentially a teaching that your actions do matter. There are dangers in life, not only outside, but also inside the mind. But you can also train the mind to act in a way that avoids those dangers. As the Buddha says, a strong sense of heedfulness is what underlies all skillful behavior **[§27]**. Notice: He doesn't say that our behavior is good because we're innately good. He says we behave well when we're heedful. We sense the dangers in life and we do what we can to avoid them. That's the third healthy ego functioning.

The fourth is altruism, which is the realization that you cannot look only for your own happiness, but that your happiness has to also depend to some extent on the happiness of others. This principle in Buddhism is called compassion.

There's a story from the Canon that shows how this quality is derived from heedfulness **[§28]**. One evening King Pasenadi is alone in his bedroom with his queen, Mallikā. At a tender moment, the king turns to the queen and asks her, "Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" Now, you know what the king is thinking. He wants the queen to say, "Yes, your majesty, I love you more than I love myself." And if this were a Hollywood movie, that's what she would say. But this is not Hollywood. This is the Pāli Canon. The queen says, "No. There's no one I love more than myself. And how about you? Is there anyone you love more than yourself?" And the king has to admit, "Well, no." That's the end of the scene.

The king leaves the palace and goes to see the Buddha to tell him what happened, and the Buddha says, "The queen is right. You can search the entire world and you will never find anyone you love more than yourself. In the same way, all other beings love themselves fiercely." But the conclusion the Buddha draws from this is interesting. He doesn't cite this as an excuse for selfishness. Instead, he uses it as a rationale for compassion. He says that because all beings love themselves so fiercely, if you really want happiness, then you shouldn't harm others because otherwise your

happiness won't last.

There are two principles behind his reasoning here. One is that if your happiness depends on other people's suffering, they won't stand for it. They'll try to destroy your happiness whenever they get the chance. Second, the principle of sympathy: If you see that your own happiness depends on other people's suffering, deep in your heart you can't really be happy. So this is the basis for compassion. That's the fourth healthy ego function.

The fifth healthy ego function is humor. The Buddha doesn't talk explicitly about this topic, but there are many stories in the Canon that show his good sense of humor. I'll tell you two of them. The first is a story told by the Buddha concerning a monk who gains a vision of devas while meditating. The monk asks them, "Do you know where the end of the physical universe is?" And the devas say, "No, we don't know, but there is a higher level of devas. Maybe they know." So the monk continues meditating and he gets to the next level of devas. He asks them the same question, and he gets the same answer: "There's a higher level. Maybe they know." This goes on for ten levels or so. Finally, the last level of devas say, "No, we don't know the end of the physical universe, but there is the Great Brahmā. He must know. If you meditate hard, you may get to see him."

The monk continues meditating until the Great Brahmā appears in a flash of light. He asks his question of the Great Brahmā, and the Great Brahmā responds, "I, monk, am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-Powerful, the Sovereign Lord, the Maker, Creator, Chief, Appointer and Ruler, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be." Now if this were the book of Job, the monk would say, "I understand." But again, this is the Pāli Canon. The monk says, "That's not what I asked you. I asked you where the end of the physical universe is." Again, the Great Brahmā says, "I, monk, am Brahmā, the Great Brahmā," etc. Three times. Finally, the Great Brahmā pulls the monk aside by the arm and says, "Look, I don't know, but I have all of these devas in my entourage who believe that I know everything. They would be very disillusioned if they learned that I can't answer your question." So he sends the monk back to the

Buddha, who answers the question after rephrasing it, pointing to where the physical universe has no footing in the mind.

That's one example of the Buddha's humor in the Canon.

Another example concerns a monk, Sāgata, who had great psychic power. One day he did battle with a great fire-breathing serpent and won. He ended up capturing the serpent in his bowl. People heard about this and were very impressed. They wanted to give him a very special gift, so they went to ask a group of monks, "What is something that monks don't usually get?" But they asked the wrong group of monks. These monks said, "We don't usually get hard liquor." So the next morning all the laypeople in the city prepared liquor for Sāgata. After drinking hard liquor at every house, he passed out at the city gate. The Buddha came along with a group of monks, saw Sāgata, and told the monks to pick him up and take him back to the monastery. They laid him down on the ground with his head to the Buddha and his feet in the other direction.

Now Sāgata didn't know where he was, so he started turning around back and forth, back and forth, until finally his feet were pointed at the Buddha. The Buddha asked the monks, "Before, didn't he show respect to us?" And the monks said, "Yes." "Is he showing respect now?" "No." "And before, didn't he do battle with a fire-breathing serpent." "Yes." "Could he do battle with a salamander now?" "No." This is why we have a rule against drinking alcohol.

Most of the humorous stories in the Canon are found in the Vinaya, the section explaining the rules for the monks. I think this is very important. It shows a very humane approach to morality. If you live under a group of rules that lacks a sense of humor, it can be very oppressive. Those rules can be very difficult to follow while maintaining a sense of reasonable and intelligent self-respect. But when a sense of morality is based on a wise sense of humor, it reveals an understanding of the foibles of human nature, and the rules are easier to follow with dignity. This is why humor is a healthy ego function. If you can laugh at yourself in a good-natured way, it's a lot easier to drop your old unskillful habits without any self-

recrimination. That makes it a lot easier to practice.

So as we can see, the Buddha teaches all the five types of healthy ego functioning. This means that we cannot say that he is teaching non-ego or egolessness. In fact, these teachings on these five qualities are another way in which he teaches a healthy sense of self.

We can also see that these teachings on developing a healthy ego include some of the basic virtues of the Buddha—discernment, compassion, and purity: the discernment in anticipation, sublimation, and humor; the compassion in altruism; and the purity in suppression. In this way, these three qualities of the Buddha come from healthy ego functioning in the intelligent pursuit of happiness. Unlike some religious teachers, the Buddha doesn't encourage you to feel ashamed of your desire for happiness or to deny it. Instead, he shows you how to train that desire so that it leads to true happiness and develops noble qualities of heart and mind along the way. He shows you how your ego can become wise, compassionate, and pure.

Even the perception of not-self, if we apply it the right way, is a healthy ego function. Remember, we're not trying to let go of our sense of self because we hate it, for that would encourage a form of neurosis. We're letting it go because we've come to understand, through developing our skills on the path, both the uses and the limitations of healthy perceptions of self. We're letting go to find a higher level of happiness—which is what healthy ego functioning is all about.

The Buddha himself makes the point that the not-self perception is to be used for the sake of happiness:

> "'Monks, do you see any clinging in the form of a doctrine of self which, when you cling to it, there would not arise sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair?"
>
> And the monks respond, "No, Lord."
>
> And the Buddha says, "Neither do I. What do you think, if a person were to gather or to burn or do as he likes with the grass, twigs,

branches, and leaves here in Jeta's Grove, would the thought occur to you, 'It's us that this person is gathering, burning, or doing with as he likes'?"

The monks say, "No, Lord. Why is that? Because those things are not our self nor do they pertain to our self."

And then the Buddha says, "Even so, monks, whatever is not yours, let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare & happiness. What is not yours?

"Form is not yours. Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare & happiness.

"Feeling is not yours. Let go of it....

"Perception is not yours. Let go of it....

"Fabrications are not yours. Let go of them....

"Consciousness is not yours. Let go of it. Your letting go of it will be for your long-term welfare & happiness." — *MN 22*

This is a healthy and fruitful application of the perception of not-self: the topic we're going to take up tomorrow.

TALK 6

Not-self for Mundane Happiness

May 26, 2011

For the past three days we've been talking about a skillful perception of self. Tonight and tomorrow night we'll be talking about the skillful perception of not-self.

These two perceptions actually go together, because when you develop healthy self perceptions, they help to ensure that you use not-self perceptions in a healthy and mature way. You're not depriving yourself of your means for finding happiness. You're actually adding a new set of strategies that can help you find greater happiness. You realize that certain things lie beyond your control and that through accepting that fact, and letting go of your identification with those things, you can find happiness more easily and effectively.

As the Buddha indicated in the passage we ended with last night, we already have experience in applying the perception of not-self to everyday experience. If you see people burning leaves and twigs, and you know that those leaves and twigs don't belong to you, you don't get upset. In fact, if you think back to your childhood, you realize that the perception of not-self is something you've been developing all along, and for this very reason: It aids in your pursuit of happiness. The times when you learned that something was not under your control and you accepted the fact that it was futile to try to control it: That enabled you to let it go as not-self, as not yours, so that you could focus your efforts in areas where you *could* exert control. For example, if one of your toys got broken and couldn't be fixed, you learned that you could be happier if you stopped carrying it around, and instead focused your attention on the toys that were still in good-enough shape to play with.

In this way the perception of not-self is the other side of the coin of the

perception of self. Once you define self, you draw a boundary around self; what lies outside of that boundary is not-self. If you do this skillfully, it can focus your attention on the areas where your efforts can bear fruit, and can help you avoid trying to control things that you can't.

The general difficulty here is that some things lie to some extent under your control, but not totally. There are also things that once were under your control but now no longer are—for example, as in a relationship that has died. Another difficulty is when you feel a need for something even though you can't control it—as in a relationship that's very unstable. That sort of thing is difficult to accept as not-self.

Now, these difficulties are made easier when you talk with other people who help you realize that these limits on your control are normal for everyone. In other words, there's nothing particularly wrong with you. The other way of making this process easier is to find something else to control. For example, when one relationship dies, you find another one.

Still we have the problem that sometimes we listen to the wrong people who encourage us to try to control things that we really cannot control, perhaps through magical thinking. Magical thinking is the belief that something can be made good simply through the power of your thought or through the power of a ritual practice. Another frequently unskillful way to try to control things is through prayer. As the Buddha once said, if prayer really worked, there would be no poor people in the world, no ugly people in the world, no untimely deaths **[§29]**.

The other extreme is when other people encourage you to give up exerting any control over anything at all. They tell you to try not to have desire for anything; just accept everything as it is, and be content that that's all you can do. This, of course, makes it impossible to practice the path. You simply try to clone awakening: You hear that an awakened person has no desire, so you tell yourself to have no desire; an awakened person has no preferences, so you tell yourself to have no preferences. This is twisting the horns of a cow in trying to get milk and seeing that no milk is coming out, so you say, "Oh, well, there must be no way of getting milk because I've been

twisting the horn for a long time. So I should just accept the fact that milk is unattainable."

That's an unskillful use of the not-self perception.

The Buddha's strategy in using the perception of not-self is to train you to understand accurately what does lie under your control and what doesn't; abandoning what doesn't; and then using what level of control you *do* have in a skillful direction so that you can ultimately put an end to suffering.

Now just as there are two levels of right view—right view aimed at a happy rebirth and right view aimed at gaining total release **[§30]**—there are two levels in the Buddha's strategy in skillfully using the perception of not-self.

Tonight, we'll talk about the first level—the skillful not-self perceptions that will result in a happy rebirth—and we'll discuss the second level tomorrow.

Some Western people have trouble with the teaching on rebirth, but usually that's because we don't know how to use the teaching skillfully.

To begin with, it's important to understand that, in teaching rebirth, the Buddha was not just adopting a cultural assumption from his time. Rebirth was a hot topic in ancient India. Some people argued that it did happen, others argued very strongly that it didn't, with the argument centering around how you defined what a person was, and then showing how what you were could or couldn't take birth.

So when the Buddha was teaching rebirth, he was consciously taking sides on the issue. But he did it in a novel way. Instead of trying to define what does or doesn't take rebirth—things you can't even see—he talked about rebirth as a process that happens through clinging and craving: mental actions you can observe and can exert some control over.

Now, the Buddha never said that he could prove rebirth, but he did say that it's a useful working hypothesis—and for two reasons. One is that the practice will ultimately confirm that it is true; and, second, that it's useful for fostering skillful attitudes that help in developing the path.

The idea of repeated rebirth might seem to be an extreme example of creating a large sense of self. After all, there's a lot of "I" in thinking, "If I'm going to survive death, I should plan for how and where I'm going to be reborn." However, the act of assuming rebirth is also an important lesson in not-self because you can't assume that you can take everything with you. There's a lot of what's currently "you" and "yours" that you're going to have to leave behind. So you have to focus carefully on learning what you can and can't take with you. The things you can't take with you, you have to let go as not-self. This forces you to take a long, hard look at what in this lifetime will be of value not only now, but also after you die.

This realization also forces heedfulness. Your only guarantee of a safe rebirth is when you've had your first taste of awakening. As long as you haven't yet had that taste, your old kamma can drag you down to the lower realms at any time. So you have to develop a sense of urgency in the practice if you really want to find a happiness that's secure. You have to be prepared to go at any moment.

Ajaan Lee often compared the process of preparing for rebirth to the process of preparing for a trip—or for a sudden forced emigration. You need to know what's good to take with you and what's best left behind, and keep the things you'll really need close at hand. As when you go camping: If you try to take too many things, you weigh yourself down. If you don't take enough, you starve and suffer other hardships. So you have to know what you really need.

A story about Ajaan Lee illustrates this point. Once he was going to take a number of his students—both lay people and monks—on a trip into the forest. They were going to meet at the main train station in Bangkok, take the train up to Lopburi, and then go into the forest from there.

Now Ajaan Fuang went along on the trip, and he knew that if you went with Ajaan Lee you had to take as little as possible, so he packed only a very small bag. But many of the other students didn't know this. Some of them brought three or four bags, and large ones at that. Perhaps they thought they would hire porters in Lopburi to carry them into the forest.

At any rate, when they got to Hua Lampong, the main station in Bangkok, Ajaan Lee saw all of the bags that everyone had brought, so instead of getting on the train he started walking up the train tracks. Now if the ajaan is walking on the tracks, everyone else has to walk on the tracks. So very quickly, people started walking behind him, struggling to carry all their bags. After a while, many of them started complaining that the bags were too heavy. At first Ajaan Lee said nothing and just kept walking. After a while, as the complaints got more insistent, all he said was, "If it's heavy, throw it away."

So, one by one, the students stopped to sort out their bags. Whatever they really needed, they put in one bag. And as for the remaining bags, they threw them into the lotus ponds on either side of the tracks. When they got to the railroad station at Saam Sen, which is the next railroad station north of Hua Lampong, Ajaan Lee saw that everybody's bags were small and manageable, so he let them all get on the train. In this way he taught them an important lesson: that you have to be very careful and selective about what you try to take with you.

And what can you take with you? Two things. One is your actions; the other is the qualities of the mind. Traditionally, there are seven treasures you can take with you: conviction, virtue, shame, compunction, learning the Dhamma, generosity, and discernment **[§31]**. These are inner treasures that can carry over into the next life. Think again of going on a camping trip. One way of keeping your baggage light is by having lots of skills: knowing how to find what you need in the forest, how to forage for food, how to start a fire without matches, how to build a shelter if you don't have a tent. In the same way, by developing these seven inner treasures you take skills with you—skills you can use—and you don't have to load yourself down.

The Canon gives other lists of qualities you can take with you as well, such as the ten perfections: generosity, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance, truth, determination, goodwill, and equanimity.

Notice that these lists contain the basic acts of merit: generosity, virtue,

and the development of goodwill. As we have already noted, each of these meritorious actions gives lessons in developing a skillful sense of self. At the same time, each also gives practice in developing a skillful sense of not-self, for each involves giving up something of lesser worth for the sake of something of greater worth. Each requires that you see the things of lesser worth as not-self.

For instance, the Buddha recommends seeing generosity as a trade. Every time you give, you gain something in return. You gain a higher state of mind, the respect of others, a sense of fellowship with the people around you, and a more spacious sense of your life. You learn how to see that the item you give away is not yours and that the quality of mind developed through giving is more worth holding on to.

The other forms of meritorious action also teach important lessons in not-self. When you try to develop virtue, you'll find voices in the committee of your mind that resist the precepts. You have to learn how not to identify with them—and how to do it skillfully—as part of developing virtue as a treasure or a perfection. Similarly with the practice of goodwill: You learn to see ill will as something you don't want to identify with. As Ajaan Lee said, if you have ill will for someone, it's like leaving a magnet in the world. It'll pull you back to that person when you get reborn. So you want to learn to see thoughts of ill will as not-self.

There's another list of teachings that helps you take a long-term view of what's worth identifying with and what's not. It's called the eight worldly dhammas: wealth, loss of wealth, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. These, the Buddha says, are basically what the world has to offer—and it's not much, is it? You notice that they come in pairs. It's impossible to have one without the other. If you try to hold onto your wealth, you lose it anyhow. If you try to identify with whatever status you have, it makes it difficult when you lose that status. The same with praise and criticism, pleasure and pain. So, it's best not to try to hold on to these things, but it is possible to get good use out of them while you have them: to use the things you can't take with you as means for developing qualities of

mind that you can.

For instance, take a look at the money in your wallet. Is your name written on it? No, it's the name of the government. They can take it back whenever they want to. It's not really yours. Even with your credit card: It may have your name on it, but it also has the bank's name, and we know who's really in charge of it. So while you have that wealth, try to make good use of it. Use it in a way that gives rise to virtues in the mind, such as generosity and goodwill.

Similarly with status: Try to use the power that comes with status to do good for the world. When you suffer loss of wealth and loss of status, learn how to take advantage of what they have to offer, too. For example when you lose wealth and status, you find out who your true friends are. You're also forced to become more ingenious in making do with little. This develops your discernment and ingenuity.

When praise comes, try to use the praise in a skillful way. Remember that the people praising you are trying to encourage you to keep on doing something. Don't let the praise go to your head, thinking that you're already good enough and that you don't have to try to do better.

At the same time, though, you have to remember that when people praise you they sometimes have ulterior motives. They may be encouraging you to do something that isn't really right, so you have to be careful. As for criticism, if the criticism is true, you've learned something important about yourself, something that you can learn to correct within yourself. Your faults are easy to hide from yourself, which is why the Buddha says that if someone points them out to you, think of that person as someone who's pointing out treasure. If the criticism is false, you've learned something about the other person. It may not be something you want to learn, but it's good to know.

Ajaan Lee also said to watch out for status and praise. Once you have a high status and people praise you, they confine you with their desires. If, on the other hand, you have no status and people call you a dog, remember that dogs have no laws. They can go wherever they want.

What this means is that you learn how to take advantage of all of these things when they come, whether they're good or bad, and realize that none of them will last permanently. You can't really hold to them as yours, you have to see them as not-self, but if you use them to develop good qualities of the mind, you've gotten the best use out of them: developing good qualities that you can use in this lifetime and that will carry over after death. You've made a wise trade.

The Buddha also says that when you learn how to look at gain and loss over the very long-term, over many lifetimes, it helps you to overcome your attachment both to wealth and to disappointment and grief. He says to remind yourself that you have already experienced extremes of wealth and poverty many times, in many different lifetimes, so you shouldn't get carried away with whatever wealth you have in this lifetime, or jealous of other people's wealth, or upset about whatever poverty you fall into. Realize that material things come and go, but the state of your mind is the most important thing you have. This is how you develop the discernment to deal skillfully with whatever comes your way, both in this life and in the next.

In other words, the Buddha has you look at life and death over the long term, realizing that in order to develop good qualities in the mind you have to abandon your attachments, your sense of self around many things. But this is a trade, a very wise and advantageous trade. You gain many important skillful mental qualities in return.

Now this is not just an exercise in delayed gratification, because even in the present moment you gain a healthy sense of self, one that's always trying to learn how to do what is skillful, always trying to learn from mistakes, and always willing to learn how to let go of unhealthy ways of identification.

Contemplating these facts gives you a sense of empowerment, of command. You can shape the life that you want, the life that will give rise to long-term happiness, both now and in the future.

However, this contemplation also gives rise to a sense of heedfulness.

You see that you need to be careful in how you order your priorities.

Eventually, though, it gives rise to a sense of disenchantment. You realize that things like wealth and status, praise and pleasure, come and go, come and go, and they begin to lose their allure. You don't want to make them your top priority.

This combined sense of empowerment, heedfulness, and disenchantment is a healthy combination. On the one hand, the element of empowerment keeps you from trying to take the short-cut of giving up at the beginning of the path. In other words, you don't just say, "I'll just accept the way things are and not really strive for anything better, and try to find peace that way." Instead, you try to find peace by developing your powers, and you discover that a great measure of happiness can be found in this way. You gain discernment in deciding what is really important in life and what sorts of happiness are more valuable than others. In this way, you're actually pushing against the characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. You try to find a sense of happiness that is somewhat constant, easeful, and to some extent under your control.

But then you run up against the limitations of this sort of activity. You work hard to get good things in life, but then to develop generosity you have to give them away. By following the precepts, you gain a good lifetime, but even a good lifetime involves aging, illness, and death. Even heavenly beings have to die. You also realize that, over the long term, the comfort that comes from good actions can often lead to heedlessness and complacency: People born into good conditions all too easily take them for granted and get lazy. They start abusing their good fortune.

So even the good things in life contain their dangers. And when you take a long-term view, whatever narratives you plan for your next lifetime begin to seem petty, because given that there's all that aging, illness, and death, there are going to be many, many tears. As the Buddha once said, which do you think is greater? The tears you have shed over many lifetimes or the water in the ocean? And the answer is the tears.

There's another sutta that makes a similar point but more graphically.

The Buddha once asked some monks, “Which do you think is greater? All the water in the oceans or the blood you have shed from having your head cut off? Think of all the times you’ve been a cow and you had your head cut off. Think of all the times you’ve been a sheep and had your head cut off. All the times you’ve been a pig and had your head cut off. All the many times you’ve been a human being but you were a thief and had your head cut off. All the many times you were a highway robber and had your head cut off. The many times you committed adultery and had your head cut off. For each case, the blood is more than all the water in the oceans.”

The monks who heard this talk all became arahants right away.

When you think about things like this, you start looking for release. You see that even the greatest happiness in the realms of rebirth has its limitations, and that the only really true happiness is freedom. That’s when you’re ready for the transcendent level of the Buddha’s teaching on not-self.

Which is what we’ll discuss tomorrow night.

TALK 7

Not-self for Transcendent Happiness

May 27, 2011

Last night we talked about the teaching on not-self on the mundane level as it relates to the issue of rebirth and kamma. On this level, you apply the perception of not-self in a selective way. You look at the skills you can take with you, you figure out what things would prevent you from taking good skills with you, and you try to perceive the second set of things as not-self. In this way you can develop the conditions for a good rebirth and the ability to deal with whatever you may encounter as you go through the cycle of death and rebirth.

But as you contemplate the issue of rebirth, you begin to see that even if you develop good mental qualities, the whole process is still very risky and uncertain. When things get comfortable, it's very easy to get complacent, and to forget to keep working at developing good qualities. And even the best life in the cosmos has to end in separation and death. You've experienced these sufferings countless times in the past, and if you don't gain release from the process of rebirth you'll have to endure the same sufferings countless times in the future. When this realization goes deeply into the heart, you're ready for the transcendent teaching on not-self.

That's the topic for tonight's talk.

The transcendent teaching on not-self derives from transcendent right view, and transcendent right view comes in two stages.

The first stage sees experience in terms of the four noble truths of suffering, its origination, its cessation, and the path of practice leading to its cessation. As you may remember, each of these truths carries a duty: If you want to put an end to suffering, suffering should be comprehended, its cause should be abandoned, its cessation should be realized, and the path to its cessation should be developed as a skill **[§7]**. The purpose of the

transcendent teaching on not-self is to help you perform each of these duties.

In the first noble truth, the Buddha identifies suffering with the five clinging-aggregates. Notice that the aggregates themselves are not suffering. The mind suffers because it clings to them. As I've already mentioned, clinging is also similar to the process of feeding. We keep doing something again and again—that's the clinging—as a means of finding happiness: That's the feeding.

A good example of this is an experiment some neurobiologists once did with mice. They located the pleasure center in each mouse's brain and planted a little electrode in there. When the mice pushed their heads against a little bar, the bar would give a mild electric stimulation to the pleasure center. They got so addicted to pressing their heads against the bar—doing it again and again and again—that they forgot to eat and they died. They were "feeding" on a pleasure that was very immediate and intense, but provided no nourishment. That's why they died.

The same principle applies to the human mind. We usually feed on the aggregates in a way that provides no real nourishment, and so our goodness dies.

On the transcendent level of right view, the Buddha has us use the perception of not-self as a means for comprehending this clinging and feeding to the point where we feel no more passion for it **[§32]**. But his approach is a little indirect. As we've already seen, instead of telling you simply to stop feeding on the aggregates, he has you turn them into a path: the health food that gives strength to the mind to the point where it no longer needs to feed.

The primary example of this is the practice of right concentration. As we've already said, right concentration is composed of the five aggregates, and the feelings of ease, rapture, and refreshment that come from right concentration are health food for the mind. You learn through this practice that you can find a sense of happiness that comes from within, and you no longer need to go looking for nourishment outside.

To develop this sort of concentration, you have to apply the perception of not-self in a selective way. You hold on to your concentration, and apply the perception of not-self to any distracting thoughts that would pull you away from the object of your concentration. As you gain skill and maturity in applying this perception in this way, it can enable you to let go of many attachments to other, lesser forms of happiness that you now realize you no longer need: in particular, the pleasures of sensuality. When you realize you no longer need them, you find that there was nothing really there.

One of my favorite cartoons shows a group of cows in a pasture. One of the cows is jerking its head up in a sudden state of surprise and realization, saying, "Hey, wait a minute! This is grass! We've been eating grass!!"

The Canon has a similar story. A blind man has been given an old dirty rag and told that it's a clean, white cloth. He's very protective of his clean white cloth. But then his relatives take him to a doctor and the doctor cures his blindness. He looks at the cloth and realizes that he was fooled: It's just a dirty old rag.

The Dhamma point both in the cartoon and in the story is that we often blindly look for pleasure in things that—when we come to our senses—we realize were never all that satisfying to begin with. In some cases, the pleasure is actually unhealthy, causing you to do things you later regret.

The practice of jhāna provides the perspective that allows you to step back from your sensual passions and all your other unskillful ways of looking for pleasure to see that they weren't worth the effort put into gaining them. This forces you to step back from the unskillful committee members that push for those ways of looking for pleasure, and to ask whether you want to continue associating and identifying with them or not.

This process isn't always easy. You tend to identify with those unskillful committee members because you associate them with pleasure. But the practice of jhāna helps make this process of dis-identification possible. When you can see that—in comparison to the blameless pleasure of jhāna—these other committee members also bring you stress and pain, you can more easily regard them as not-self. You can let them go.

As the practice of jhāna matures, there eventually comes a point when you realize that only one attachment remains blocking unconditioned happiness, and that's attachment to the path itself: in particular, to the practice of concentration and the development of discernment. This is where the Buddha starts having you apply the transcendent teaching on not-self all around, and not just selectively. In other words, you apply the perception of not-self to every instance of clinging to the aggregates, even to the aggregates that go into jhāna and discernment. This is how the not-self teaching helps you with the duties of comprehending stress and abandoning every form of craving, clinging, passion, or delight that would give rise to stress.

The following passage shows the main stages in this process. First you master the state of jhāna. Then you try to develop perceptions that give rise to a sense of dispassion for the jhāna. Once you've developed that sense of dispassion, you develop the perception in which you see all-around dispassion and cessation as desirable. Then you learn how to drop even that perception and stay right there. That, the Buddha says, is where full awakening can occur.

> "Suppose that an archer or archer's apprentice were to practice on a straw man or mound of clay, so that after a while he would become able to shoot long distances, to fire accurate shots in rapid succession, and to pierce great masses. In the same way, there is the case where a monk... enters & remains in the first jhāna: rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation.
>
> "He regards whatever phenomena there that are connected with form, feeling, perception, fabrications, & consciousness, as inconstant, stressful, a disease, a cancer, an arrow, painful, an affliction, alien, a disintegration, an emptiness, not-self.
>
> "He turns his mind away from those phenomena, and having done so, inclines his mind to the property of deathlessness: 'This is peace, this is exquisite—the pacification of all fabrications; the relinquishing of all acquisitions; the ending of craving; dispassion;

cessation; Unbinding.'

"Staying right there, he reaches the ending of the fermentations. Or, if not, then—through this very Dhamma-passion, this Dhamma-delight, and from the total wasting away of the first five fetters [self-identity views, grasping at habits & practices, uncertainty, sensual passion, and irritation]—he is due to be reborn [in the Pure Abodes], there to be totally unbound, never again to return from that world....

"[Similarly with the second, third, and fourth jhāna **[§22]**.]" — AN 9:36

A couple of points in this passage need to be explained. First: When the Buddha talks about the ending of fermentation, he's talking about awakening. The fermentations are the defilements that come bubbling up in the mind.

Second—with regard to the second stage where the Buddha says to perceive the aggregates in the jhāna as inconstant, stressful, etc.—there are other passages in the Canon that expand on this point. In these passages the Buddha recommends that you apply three questions derived from the original question that he said was the basis of discernment: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" At this point in the practice, he recommends looking more closely at the idea of long-term happiness. Focus on the word "long-term." You know that jhāna is a long-term happiness, but now you realize that long-term is no longer good enough. It's inconstant.

The Pāli term here, *anicca*, is sometimes translated as "impermanent," but that's not what it really means. Its opposite, *nicca*, describes something that's done constantly and reliably. You can depend on it. But if something is *anicca*, it's unreliable. It wavers. If you try to base your happiness on it, you have to keep tensing up around it—like trying to find some rest while sitting on a chair with wobbly, uneven legs.

So when you see that even the long-term happiness of jhāna is inconstant—unreliable and wavering—you realize that it's not really all that pleasant.

Even in what pleasure it *does* offer, there is stress. And because there's stress, why would you want to claim it as yours?

This line of thinking corresponds to the three questions that the Buddha has you ask at this stage in the practice **[§19]**. The first is, "Is this constant?" And the answer is No. That leads to the next question: "If it's inconstant, is it pleasant?" Again the answer is No. That leads to the third question: "If something is inconstant and stressful, is it fitting to say that 'This is me, this is myself, this is what I am?'" In other words, "Is it skillful to lay claim to this?" And the answer again is No.

Now, notice that the Buddha is not asking you to come to the conclusion that there is no self. He's simply asking you to see if this way of creating a sense of self is skillful. His method of analysis, when it's consistently applied to all of the aggregates, gives rise to a sense of disenchantment and dispassion for any possible type of clinging. But notice: You're not doing this out of pessimism. You're doing this for the sake of your own true happiness, but now it's better than long-term, longer than long-term. You want something totally timeless and reliable **[§20]**.

As that passage just now indicated, sometimes this series of questions leads to full awakening, but sometimes it doesn't. It leads instead to the state of non-return. Now, the level of awakening at non-return is not bad. A group of people once came to see my teacher, Ajaan Fuang. They had been studying Buddhist philosophy and had heard that he was a good teacher, but they didn't know what he taught. So they came and asked him to teach them. He said, "OK, close your eyes and focus on your breath." And they said, "No, no, no, we can't do that." He asked, "Why?" And they said, "If we focus on the breath, we'll get stuck on jhāna and then we'll be reborn as brahmās." And Ajaan Fuang responded, "What's wrong with being reborn as a brahmā? Even non-returners are born as brahmās. And being reborn as a brahmā is better than being reborn as a dog."

In other words, if you haven't attained jhāna, it's hard to let go of sensual passions. And people stuck on sensual passions—even if they've studied Buddhist philosophy—can easily be reborn as dogs. So the dangers of jhāna

and non-return are much slighter than the dangers of not reaching those attainments.

Still, if possible, the Buddha does encourage you to try to go beyond the level of non-return and gain full awakening. This is where he brings in another teaching, another perception. In Pāli, the phrase is, *"Sabbe dhammā anattā,"* which means, "All phenomena are not-self **[§33]**." This applies both to fabricated phenomena and unfabricated phenomena. And it's important to note here that this perception is part of the path, not the goal. In other words, it's not the conclusion you come to when you arrive at awakening; it's a perception you use to get beyond your last attachments.

As the above passage states, what keeps a non-returner from gaining total awakening is a type of passion and delight: passion for the deathless and delight in the deathless. "Passion-and-delight" is another term for clinging. Even when the mind lets go of its clinging and passion for the aggregates, there still is something it may cling to: the experience of the deathless that follows after letting go of the aggregates. The mind can regard its experience of the deathless as a phenomenon, as an object of the mind. Where there is an object, there is a subject—the knowing self, the sense of "I am" **[§34]**—and this provides a foothold for passion and delight to arise: You instinctively want to control whatever you like, and so you try to control the experience of the deathless, even though the idea of "control" here is superfluous—the deathless isn't going to change on you—and counterproductive: The self created around this desire for control actually gets in the way of total freedom. To counter this tendency toward control, the Buddha here has you apply the perception that all phenomena are not-self, even to the experience of the deathless. This is what gets rid of the "I" in "I am."

There's another passage relevant to this point where the Buddha says that when you see all phenomena arising and passing away—and this includes everything, including the path and your clinging to the deathless—when you watch everything arising, arising, arising, all the time, the idea of non-existence doesn't occur to the mind. When you see these things passing

away, passing away, passing away, the idea of existence doesn't occur to the mind. At that point, the ideas of existence and non-existence are irrelevant to your experience. All you see is stress arising, stress passing away **[§35]**.

This has several ramifications. If ideas of existence and non-existence don't occur to you, then the question of whether the self exists or doesn't exist wouldn't occur to you, either. This gets rid of the "am" in "I am." This also does away with your fear of going out of existence if things are let go, because the mind isn't thinking in those terms.

At the same time, you're reaching the higher stage of transcendent right view, with a higher and more refined level of duty. As you remember with the four noble truths, each of the truths has a duty, but in this case—when you see everything arising and passing away simply as stress—all the duties are reduced to one: You comprehend things to the point of dispassion. This means that you let go, let go, let go even of concentration, even of discernment, even of the act of clinging to the deathless. In the words of Ajaan Mun, all four noble truths are turned into one. They all carry the same duty, which is to let go of everything.

This allows the mind to experience nibbāna not as a phenomenon, but as a total experience. At this point, you've found total happiness, which no longer needs any protection, no longer needs to be maintained. There's no longer any issue of control or non-control. There's no need for the strategy of self to create this happiness, and no need for a sense of self to consume or experience it. Where you don't draw a line to define self, there's no line to define not-self. Where there's no clinging, there's no need for the strategy of not-self. So strategies of self or not-self are all put aside. Even the strategy of dispassion itself gets put aside. At this point, the mind no longer has need for any strategies at all because it has found a happiness that's truly solid. It's not a phenomenon, it's a happiness. The Buddha calls it a special form of consciousness that doesn't need to be experienced through the six senses, or what he calls "the all" **[§36]**. It's directly experienced as total freedom. And at the moment of awakening, there's no experience of the six senses.

However, after the moment of awakening, when the mind returns to the

experience of the senses, this sense of freedom stays. The Canon illustrates this with an image—not a pretty image, but very memorable. The image is this: Suppose there's a dead cow. You take a knife and remove the skin, cutting all of the tendons and tissues that connect the skin to the cow. Then you put the skin back on. The question is: Is the skin still attached to the cow as it was before? And the answer is No. Even though it's right next to the cow, it's no longer attached. In the same way, the practice of discernment is like a knife. It cuts through all of the attachments between the senses and their objects **[§§37-38]**. Once the attachments are gone, then even if you put the knife away, you cannot connect things in the way they were before. The eye still sees forms, the ear hears sounds, but there's a sense that these things are no longer joined **[§39]**.

As I said, the image isn't pretty, but it conveys the point that once total freedom is found, it's never lost.

One final point. As we said in one of the earlier talks, you are limited by what you are obsessed with. You define yourself by your obsessions and attachments, and that sort of definition places limitations on you. When there are no longer any attachments or obsessions, you are no longer defined **[§§40-43]**. And because you are no longer defined, you can't be described as existing, not existing, neither, or both. In other words, ideas of the existence of the self and the non-existence of the self no longer apply. As for perceptions of self and not-self, those are like the knife that has been used to cut things through but now has been put aside.

TALK 8

Self, Not-self, & Beyond

May 28, 2011

Several years ago I was reading an article in a magazine in which a man was describing his childhood in New York City. His parents had come from Eastern Europe to live in America, and because the family was poor they put a lot of emphasis on his education. They encouraged him to get as much education as he could. One detail in their encouragement I found very insightful. Every day, when the young boy came home from school, the mother didn't ask him what he had learned that day. Instead she asked him, "What questions did you ask today?" The mother was very wise because she realized that it's through questions that we give shape to our knowledge: to understand how one piece of knowledge relates to other pieces of knowledge, and to figure out the best way to use our knowledge. This is why it's important to shape our questions skillfully, for if we don't, we give the wrong shape to everything else we know, and we won't get the best use out of our knowledge.

This principle applies very directly to the Buddha's teachings—which are all strategic—and in particular to the teaching on not-self. To understand this teaching we have to understand what questions it's answering.

If you've ever been in an introductory course on Buddhism, you've probably heard this question: "If there is no self, what does the action and what receives the results of the action?" Our discussions this week show that this question is misconstrued in two ways.

The first is that the Buddha never said that there is no self, and he never said that there is a self. The question of whether a self does or doesn't exist is a question he put aside.

The second reason for why the question is misconstrued is because it has

the framework backwards. It's taking the teaching of not-self as the framework and kamma as something that's supposed to fit inside the framework. Actually, the relationship is the other way around. Kamma is the framework, and the teaching of not-self is meant to fit in the framework. In other words, the Buddha takes the teachings on skillful and unskillful kamma as his basic categorical teaching. Within that context, the question on self and not-self becomes: When is a perception of self skillful kamma, and when is a perception of not-self skillful kamma? And when are they not skillful?

So to get the most use out of the teachings on self and not-self, we have to approach them with these questions in mind. The Buddha is not trying to define what you are. He's not trying to fit you into a box. He's more concerned with helping you. He tries to show you how you define yourself so that you can learn how to use that process of self-definition in a way that leads to the ultimate goal of his teaching: the end of suffering and the attainment of ultimate freedom, ultimate happiness. In this way the teachings on self and not-self are part of the answer to the question, "What when I do it will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?"

In this context the Buddha talks about the process of what he calls I-making and my-making, with the purpose of showing you how to engage in these actions in a skillful way. Normally we engage in these processes all of the time. We create a sense of "I" in two ways: (1) around what we can control in order to attain happiness and (2) around the aspects of our experience—our mind, our body—that we hope will taste happiness. In other words, we have a sense of our self as the agent or producer of happiness, and our self as the consumer of happiness. We start out very early in life developing our sense of self in these ways. And we create many different selves. Remember the story I told about your little sister. When bullies down the street are threatening her, she is very much *your* sister. When you get her home safely and she takes your toy car, she is no longer your sister. She's the Other. This shows that your sense of self is changing all the time—like an amoeba taking on many different forms.

So it's good to understand that the sense of self is a strategy, and that we engage in this strategy, making many selves, all the time. Sometimes they're mutually coherent, sometimes not. Sometimes they're honest and straightforward, and sometimes not. This is something that becomes very apparent during meditation. As we've been mentioning throughout this week, your mind is like a committee. Each member of the committee is a different self that you've created and nurtured at some point during your life as a particular strategy for attaining a particular happiness. Sometimes they get along; sometimes they don't. Sometimes they tell the truth; sometimes they lie. When you start meditating, you encounter them all. The skill of meditation lies in learning how to achieve some order and honesty among the members of the committee, identifying with the more skillful ones, trying to keep the unskillful ones under control, and bringing some truth to their interactions so that you can bring the mind into jhāna.

The idea of not-self is also a strategy that we've used many times. We've learned that, after identifying with some things for one purpose or to fulfill one desire, we have to dis-identify with them for the purpose of fulfilling another desire. For example, you may identify with your fingernails when they look attractive, but when they get too long you have to cut them and throw the cut-off pieces away.

As with our various perceptions of self, our perceptions of not-self can be either skillful or unskillful. Sometimes we try to lay claim to things that we cannot control, and sometimes we try to deny that we have any responsibility for things that we *can* control.

In the Buddha's teaching on how to put an end to suffering, he asks you to make skillful use of both kinds of strategies—self strategies and not-self strategies—and to learn how to employ them ever more skillfully, with more awareness, more discernment, to help with the duties of the four noble truths.

The line between what you think is self and not-self is determined by your sense of control. If you look carefully at the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness—you can see that you have no

absolute control over them, but you do have relative control. For example, when you tell your body to move, it moves; when you tell your mind to think about certain things, it'll think about them. But your control here is not absolute. Someday you'll tell the body to move and it won't budge.

There's the story in the Canon of a king, eighty years old, who tells a young monk, "When I was young, it was as if I had the strength of two men. But now when I mean to put my foot in one place, it goes someplace else." The same happens with your mind. There are times when you want it to think and it won't think, or it'll think about things you don't want to think about. This lesson has been impressed on me very strongly this week. When I was studying French in high school, I actually got an award as the best French student in my class. But now when I try to say something in French, nothing comes out. This may tell you something about the American education system, but it also has to do with the fact that the mind is never totally under one's control. And the situation gets worse as you get older.

So the Buddha recommends, while you have some control over the body and mind, that you make use of that control to help put an end to suffering. When the body and mind are relatively healthy and strong, you have enough control to use them as a path to the end of suffering. You start with the Buddha's first set of categorical teachings, to abandon unskillful actions and develop skillful ones in their place. You use the aggregates to be generous, to develop virtue, and to develop the mind through meditation.

As you're trying to gain skill in these practices, you come face-to-face with the committee inside. For example, when you want to be generous, some of the members of the committee like the idea of making bread to give to your friends, and some don't. Similarly with the precepts: Some of the committee members like the idea of letting the mosquito live and others want to slap it dead. And with meditation: Some members of the committee want to focus on the breath and some want to think about what to do tomorrow. So part of the skill of the practice lies in learning how to sort out the members of the committee and to develop strategies for dealing with them effectively. You learn to use the healthy ego functions of anticipation,

suppression, sublimation, altruism, and humor to train the less skillful members of the committee. As you do this, you begin to gain skill in creating a useful sense of self and not-self.

Now there are stages in the practice. After the first set of categorical teachings, you move to the second: the four noble truths. As we mentioned last night, when you put the mind on the path you take the raw material of the aggregates and turn them into jhāna. This is an important step in the practice, because as the mind gets into a state of jhāna, it finds new ways of feeding and new ways of understanding what is and isn't necessary for happiness. This focuses your attention more and more on your ability to create a sense of well-being inside, and helps you to see lesser forms of pleasure as not-self. You have a solid foundation for letting them go.

When your skill is secure, you're ready for the higher level of right view, where you start applying the perception of not-self across the board.

This is the step where you see that even though the levels of jhāna are a form of long-term welfare and happiness, nevertheless, they are still uncertain and inconstant. This is a sign that your sense of happiness has become more refined, and your standards for happiness have become higher. This is when the Buddha recommends that you develop the perception that even the pleasure of jhāna is inconstant, stressful, and not-self. This gives rise to a sense of dispassion.

To do this, he recommends refining the question that lies at the beginning of wisdom: "What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?" At this stage, your sensitivity to pleasure and happiness leads you to the realization that long-term happiness is no longer good enough. It's no longer good enough for you to want to call it "my." So now, regardless of whatever comes up in the mind, the questions become, "Is this constant?" No. "If something is inconstant, is it easeful or stressful?" Stressful. "And if it's stressful, is it fitting to call it me or mine?" Here again the answer is No. You apply these questions to all things, even to any perception you may have about the deathless. This is what inclines the mind to a state of unfabricated happiness.

What this means is that at the beginning of the path, you don't just say that everything is not-self and leave it at that. You don't try to clone awakening, telling yourself that "Awakened people have no desire so I'll have no desire, too. I won't even desire awakening. Awakened people are beyond good and evil, so I'll go beyond good and evil, too." This kind of thinking doesn't get you on the path. In fact, it keeps you off the path.

So instead of starting out by saying that everything is not-self, you try to develop your powers over what you *can* control. You push against the characteristics of inconstancy, stress, and not-self, and you see how far you can push before they push back. And you discover that, as you push, you can gain a large measure of pleasure and happiness. You develop discernment and wisdom in deciding what's really important in life, which sorts of happiness are more valuable than others.

This is how the mind develops the noble treasures of conviction, virtue, shame, compunction, learning the Dhamma, generosity, and discernment. You learn how to hold on to these qualities for the time being, and you regard as not-self whatever goes against them.

Similarly, you develop the pleasure of concentration because you see that this is much more long-term than any other pleasure. This gives you a solid foundation from which you can let go of lesser pleasures, in particular the pleasures of sensuality.

Having access to this higher form of pleasure also enables you to look at suffering and pain without being afraid of them. That way you can look at them for the purpose of comprehending them. Normally when we look at pain, we look at it with the idea either of trying to do away with it or of running away from it. In neither way, though, do we get to comprehend the suffering or the pain. But if you have a sense of confidence and good humor in the face of pain—the confidence and good humor that can come from a state of good, solid concentration—then you can look carefully at the pain to the point where you really understand it. This enables you to perform the task with regard to the first noble truth, which is to comprehend it.

In addition to confidence, the practice of jhāna also gives you a sense of

competence. You've mastered an important skill and learned how to bring some order to your committee. This way—when you run into the limitations of even the most skillfully constructed mental states and start applying the perception of not-self to everything, including the path—it's not through self-hatred. It's simply through the mature realization that this is as far as intention can take you. At that point, the mind is truly ready for an unconditioned happiness.

And here is where you see the genius of the Buddha's strategy. When the mind becomes more and more focused on the pleasures of jhāna, all of your clinging gets focused in one place, a place of great stability and clarity, so that you can watch clinging in action. Because you see that the state of concentration is the one thing worth controlling, your sense of self is focused there as well, so you can clearly see it in action, too. Once all your clinging is focused here, then when you're finally ready to cut this one last form of clinging, there's no further clinging to any fabricated phenomena at all.

This is why, when you learn how to apply the perception of not-self even to jhāna, there's an opening to the deathless. And when you can apply the perception of not-self to the phenomenon of the deathless, the mind goes beyond all phenomena and arrives at ultimate freedom and ultimate happiness—total freedom, total happiness—as a direct, pure experience.

At this point, you can put all your strategies down. Because this happiness is totally unconditioned, you don't need a producer and you don't need a consumer. There's no issue of control or no control. There's just the absolute, unshakable experience of freedom.

Many of the forest ajaans have emphasized this point in their teachings: that in the attainment of awakening, you put aside both self and not-self. Several years back, there was a controversy in Thailand as to whether nibbāna was self or not-self. The issue was even argued in the newspapers. So one day someone went to ask Ajaan Maha Boowa, "Is nibbāna self or not-self?" And his answer was, "Nibbāna is nibbāna." That was it. He then went on to explain how self and not-self are tools on the path, how both are put

down when the path has done its work, and how neither applies to the experience of nibbāna.

Ajaan Suwat, one of my teachers, also said that when you've experienced deathless happiness, you don't really care if there's something experiencing it or not. The experience is sufficient in and of itself.

What we've been describing here is a special kind of consciousness that lies beyond the aggregates: The texts call it "consciousness without surface." Once it's been attained, then freedom is never lost. The mind no longer tries to define itself, and because it's not defined, it can't be described.

What we can learn from all of these points is how to employ questions in the practice. You try to avoid questions that are not helpful in putting an end to suffering, and you adopt questions that are. These are the questions that lead to discernment, and you refine discernment by refining these questions as you use them strategically. For example, you start with the question about what leads to long-term welfare and happiness. Then you refine it to the questions that apply the three perceptions of inconstancy, stress, and not-self to all the aggregates. Then you refine that perception even further, to the perception that all phenomena are not-self, and then you finally drop that perception as well to abandon clinging in all its forms. Even the perception of dispassion that results from those perceptions is something you ultimately put aside.

So it's through these skillful questions that discernment is developed. This was the way that the Buddha himself found awakening. He looked at his actions and noticed that he was actually creating suffering. That is to say, he was looking both at the actions and at the results. Then he said, "I'm trying to act for the purpose of happiness, but why am I creating suffering? Is it actually possible to act in a way that does lead to happiness?" And he had the courage to ask that question continually, and to keep testing his answers to that question, to see how far it would take him.

This inquiry involves two qualities that are absolutely essential to any

successful meditation. The first is learning how to be observant—and not just observant in general, but being particularly observant of your actions and their results. When you're looking into the present moment, this is what you should look for: "What am I doing? What's the result of what I'm doing? Is this acceptable or not?" If it's not, that's when you bring in the other quality, which is ingenuity: "Is there some other way that I can act that would be more skillful?"

This means that, as we practice, we have to be willing to experiment—which means willing to take risks and make mistakes, but always willing to learn from those mistakes. This relates to the most skillful form of self-identity you can take along the path—the self that takes pride in always being willing to learn from its actions—because this is how you see the noble truths. After all, all the truths are actions and results. When you're acting on craving, you're engaged in the second noble truth. When you're developing mindfulness, concentration, and discernment, you're engaged in the fourth noble truth, the path. And when you master as skills the duties appropriate to each of the truths, that's when you really *know* the truths—and as Ajaan Lee says, only when you really know things in practice like this can you let them go.

This is how you find awakening. The more you exercise your freedom to act skillfully, the more you understand what it means to have freedom of choice. The more closely you look at and understand this freedom through exercising it, day by day, in all of your actions, both inner and outer, the closer you come to a freedom that's absolute—and that answers every really burning question you have.

Readings on Self & Not-self

§1. "Both formerly & now, it is only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress." — *SN 22:86*

§2. "And what is the result of stress? There are some cases in which a person overcome with stress, his mind exhausted, grieves, mourns, laments, beats his breast, & becomes bewildered. Or one overcome with stress, his mind exhausted, comes to search outside, 'Who knows a way or two to stop this stress?' I tell you, monks, that stress results either in bewilderment or in search." — *AN 6:63*

§3. "It's just as if a man were wounded with an arrow thickly smeared with poison. His friends & companions, kinsmen & relatives would provide him with a surgeon, and the man would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the man who wounded me was a noble warrior, a brahman, a merchant, or a worker.' He would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know the given name & clan name of the man who wounded me... until I know whether he was tall, medium, or short... until I know whether he was dark, ruddy-brown, or golden-colored... until I know his home village, town, or city... until I know whether the bow with which I was wounded was a long bow or a crossbow... until I know whether the bowstring with which I was wounded was fiber, bamboo threads, sinew, hemp, or bark... until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was wild or cultivated... until I know whether the feathers of the shaft with which I was wounded were those of a vulture, a stork, a hawk, a peacock, or another bird... until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was bound with the sinew of an ox, a water buffalo, a langur, or a monkey.' He would say, 'I won't have this arrow removed until I know whether the shaft with which I was wounded was that of a common arrow, a curved

arrow, a barbed, a calf-toothed, or an oleander arrow.' The man would die and those things would still remain unknown to him.

"In the same way, if anyone were to say, 'I won't live the holy life under the Blessed One as long as he does not declare to me that *"The cosmos is eternal," or that 'The cosmos is not eternal'... 'The cosmos is finite'... 'The cosmos is infinite'... 'The soul is the same thing as the body'... 'The soul is one thing and the body another'... 'After death a Tathāgata exists'... 'After death a Tathāgata does not exist'... 'After death a Tathāgata both exists & does not exist,'* ... or that *"After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,"*' the man would die and those things would still remain undeclared by the Tathāgata....

"So, Malunkyaputta, remember what is undeclared by me as undeclared, and what is declared by me as declared. And what is undeclared by me? *'The cosmos is eternal,'* is undeclared by me. *'The cosmos is not eternal,'* is undeclared by me. *'The cosmos is finite'... 'The cosmos is infinite'... 'The soul is the same thing as the body'... 'The soul is one thing and the body another'... 'After death a Tathāgata exists'... 'After death a Tathāgata does not exist'... 'After death a Tathāgata both exists & does not exist'... 'After death a Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist,'* is undeclared by me.

"And why are they undeclared by me? Because they are not connected with the goal, are not fundamental to the holy life. They do not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding *(nibbāna)*. That's why they are undeclared by me.

"And what is declared by me? *'This is stress,'* is declared by me. '*This is the origination of stress,'* is declared by me. *'This is the cessation of stress,'* is declared by me. *'This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress,'* is declared by me. And why are they declared by me? Because they are connected with the goal, are fundamental to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding. That's why they are declared by me." — *MN 63*

§4. As Ven. Ānanda was sitting there, the Blessed One said to him, "I say categorically, Ānanda, that bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, & mental misconduct should not be done."

"Given that the Blessed One has declared, lord, that bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, & mental misconduct should not be done, what drawbacks can one expect when doing what should not be done?"

"... One can fault oneself; observant people, on close examination, criticize one; one's bad reputation gets spread about; one dies confused; and —on the breakup of the body, after death—one reappears in the plane of deprivation, the bad destination, the lower realms, in hell....

"I say categorically, Ānanda, that good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, & good mental conduct should be done."

"Given that the Blessed One has declared, lord, that good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, & good mental conduct should be done, what rewards can one expect when doing what should be done?"

"... One doesn't fault oneself; observant people, on close examination, praise one; one's good reputation gets spread about; one dies unconfused; and—on the breakup of the body, after death—one reappears in the good destinations, in the heavenly world." — *AN 2:18*

§5. "Cunda, there are three ways in which one is made impure by bodily action, four ways in which one is made impure by verbal action, and three ways in which one is made impure by mental action.

UNSKILLFUL BODILY ACTION

"And how is one made impure in three ways by bodily action? There is the case where a certain person *takes life*, is brutal, bloody-handed, devoted to killing & slaying, showing no mercy to living beings. He *takes what is not given*. He takes, in the manner of a thief, things in a village or a wilderness that belong to others and have not been given by them. He *engages in sexual misconduct*. He gets sexually involved with those who are protected by their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their relatives, or their

Dhamma; those with husbands, those who entail punishments, or even those crowned with flowers by another man. This is how one is made impure in three ways by bodily action.

UNSKILLFUL VERBAL ACTION

"And how is one made impure in four ways by verbal action? There is the case where a certain person engages in *false speech*. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty [i.e., a royal court proceeding], if he is asked as a witness, 'Come & tell, good man, what you know': If he doesn't know, he says, 'I know.' If he does know, he says, 'I don't know.' If he hasn't seen, he says, 'I have seen.' If he has seen, he says, 'I haven't seen.' Thus he consciously tells lies for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of a certain reward. He engages in *divisive speech*. What he has heard here he tells there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he tells here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus breaking apart those who are united and stirring up strife between those who have broken apart, he loves factionalism, delights in factionalism, enjoys factionalism, speaks things that create factionalism. He engages in *harsh speech*. He speaks words that are harsh, cutting, bitter to others, abusive of others, provoking anger and destroying concentration. He engages in *idle chatter*. He speaks out of season, speaks what isn't factual, what isn't in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, & the Vinaya, words that are not worth treasuring. This is how one is made impure in four ways by verbal action.

UNSKILLFUL MENTAL ACTION

"And how is one made impure in three ways by mental action? There is the case where a certain person is *covetous*. He covets the belongings of others, thinking, 'O, that what belongs to others would be mine!' He bears *ill will*, corrupt in the resolves of his heart: 'May these beings be killed or cut apart or crushed or destroyed, or may they not exist at all!' He has *wrong*

view, is warped in the way he sees things: 'There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed. There is no fruit or result of good or bad actions. There is no this world, no next world, no mother, no father, no spontaneously reborn beings; no priests or contemplatives who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.' This is how one is made impure in three ways by mental action.

"These, Cunda, are the ten courses of unskillful action....

"Now, Cunda, there are three ways in which one is made pure by bodily action, four ways in which one is made pure by verbal action, and three ways in which one is made pure by mental action.

SKILLFUL BODILY ACTION

"And how is one made pure in three ways by bodily action? There is the case where a certain person, abandoning the taking of life, *abstains from the taking of life*. He dwells with his rod laid down, his knife laid down, scrupulous, merciful, compassionate for the welfare of all living beings. Abandoning the taking of what is not given, he *abstains from taking what is not given*. He does not take, in the manner of a thief, things in a village or a wilderness that belong to others and have not been given by them. Abandoning sensual misconduct, he *abstains from sexual misconduct*. He does not get sexually involved with those who are protected by their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, their relatives, or their Dhamma; those with husbands, those who entail punishments, or even those crowned with flowers by another man. This is how one is made pure in three ways by bodily action.

SKILLFUL VERBAL ACTION

"And how is one made pure in four ways by verbal action? There is the case where a certain person, abandoning false speech, *abstains from false speech*. When he has been called to a town meeting, a group meeting, a gathering of his relatives, his guild, or of the royalty, if he is asked as a

witness, 'Come & tell, good man, what you know': If he doesn't know, he says, 'I don't know.' If he does know, he says, 'I know.' If he hasn't seen, he says, 'I haven't seen.' If he has seen, he says, 'I have seen.' Thus he doesn't consciously tell a lie for his own sake, for the sake of another, or for the sake of any reward. Abandoning false speech, he abstains from false speech. He speaks the truth, holds to the truth, is firm, reliable, no deceiver of the world. Abandoning divisive speech he *abstains from divisive speech*. What he has heard here he does not tell there to break those people apart from these people here. What he has heard there he does not tell here to break these people apart from those people there. Thus reconciling those who have broken apart or cementing those who are united, he loves concord, delights in concord, enjoys concord, speaks things that create concord. Abandoning harsh speech, he *abstains from harsh speech*. He speaks words that are soothing to the ear, that are affectionate, that go to the heart, that are polite, appealing & pleasing to people at large. Abandoning idle chatter, he *abstains from idle chatter*. He speaks in season, speaks what is factual, what is in accordance with the goal, the Dhamma, & the Vinaya. He speaks words worth treasuring, seasonable, reasonable, circumscribed, connected with the goal. This is how one is made pure in four ways by verbal action.

SKILLFUL MENTAL ACTION

"And how is one made pure in three ways by mental action? There is the case where a certain person is *not covetous*. He does not covet the belongings of others, thinking, 'O, that what belongs to others would be mine!' He *bears no ill will* and is not corrupt in the resolves of his heart. [He thinks,] 'May these beings be free from animosity, free from oppression, free from trouble, and may they look after themselves with ease!' He has *right view* and is not warped in the way he sees things: 'There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are priests & contemplatives who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.' This is how one is made

pure in three ways by mental action.

"These, Cunda, are the ten courses of skillful action." — *AN 10:176*

§6. "And which have I taught and declared to be categorical teachings? *'This is stress'* I have taught and declared to be a categorical teaching. *'This is the origination of stress'... 'This is the cessation of stress'... 'This is the path of practice leading to the cessation of stress'* I have taught and declared to be a categorical teaching. And why have I taught and declared these teachings to be categorical? Because they are conducive to the goal, conducive to the Dhamma, and basic to the holy life. They lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to direct knowledge, to self-awakening, to unbinding. That's why I have taught and declared them to be categorical." — *DN 9*

§7. "Now this, monks, is the noble truth of stress: Birth is stressful, aging is stressful, death is stressful; sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair are stressful; association with the unbeloved is stressful, separation from the loved is stressful, not getting what is wanted is stressful. In short, the five clinging-aggregates are stressful.

"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the origination of stress: the craving that makes for further becoming—accompanied by passion & delight, relishing now here & now there—i.e., craving for sensuality, craving for becoming, craving for non-becoming.

"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the cessation of stress: the remainderless fading & cessation, renunciation, relinquishing, release, & letting go of that very craving.

"And this, monks, is the noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress: precisely this noble eightfold path—right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

"'This noble truth of stress is to be comprehended'... 'This noble truth of the origination of stress is to be abandoned' ... 'This noble truth of the

cessation of stress is to be realized' ... 'This noble truth of the way of practice leading to the cessation of stress is to be developed.'" — *SN 56:11*

§8. "This is the way leading to discernment: when visiting a contemplative or brahman, to ask: 'What is skillful, venerable sir? What is unskillful? What is blameworthy? What is blameless? What should be cultivated? What should not be cultivated? What, having been done by me, will be for my long-term harm & suffering? Or what, having been done by me, will be for my long-term welfare & happiness?'" — *MN 135*

§9. "There are these four ways of answering questions. Which four? There are questions that should be answered categorically. There are questions that should be answered with an analytical answer. There are questions that should be answered with a counter-question. There are questions that should be put aside. These are the four ways of answering questions." — *AN 4:42*

§10. "There is the case where an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for men of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—doesn't discern what ideas are fit for attention or what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he doesn't attend to ideas fit for attention and attends (instead) to ideas unfit for attention....

"This is how he attends inappropriately: 'Was I in the past? Was I not in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past? Having been what, what was I in the past? Shall I be in the future? Shall I not be in the future? What shall I be in the future? How shall I be in the future? Having been what, what shall I be in the future?' Or else he is inwardly perplexed about the immediate present: 'Am I? Am I not? What am I? How am I? Where has this being come from? Where is it bound?'

"As he attends inappropriately in this way, one of six kinds of view arises in him: The view *I have a self* arises in him as true & established, or

the view *I have no self*... or the view *It is precisely by means of self that I perceive self*... or the view I*t is precisely by means of self that I perceive not-self*... or the view *It is precisely by means of not-self that I perceive self* arises in him as true & established, or else he has a view like this: *This very self of mine —the knower that is sensitive here & there to the ripening of good & bad actions —is the self of mine that is constant, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, and will endure as long as eternity.* This is called a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a contortion of views, a writhing of views, a fetter of views. Bound by a fetter of views, the uninstructed run-of-the-mill person is not freed from birth, aging, & death, from sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair. He is not freed, I tell you, from suffering & stress.

"The well-instructed disciple of the noble ones—who has regard for noble ones, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma; who has regard for men of integrity, is well-versed & disciplined in their Dhamma—discerns what ideas are fit for attention and what ideas are unfit for attention. This being so, he doesn't attend to ideas unfit for attention and attends (instead) to ideas fit for attention....

"He attends appropriately, *This is stress... This is the origination of stress... This is the cessation of stress... This is the way leading to the cessation of stress.* As he attends appropriately in this way, three fetters are abandoned in him: identity-view, doubt, and grasping at habits & practices. These are called the fermentations to be abandoned by seeing." — *MN 2*

§11. "To what extent, Ānanda, does one delineate when delineating a self? Either delineating a self possessed of form and finite, one delineates that 'My self is possessed of form and finite.' Or, delineating a self possessed of form and infinite, one delineates that 'My self is possessed of form and infinite.' Or, delineating a self formless and finite, one delineates that 'My self is formless and finite.' Or, delineating a self formless and infinite, one delineates that 'My self is formless and infinite.'

"Now, the one who, when delineating a self, delineates it as possessed of form and finite, either delineates it as possessed of form and finite in the present, or of such a nature that it will [naturally] become possessed of

form and finite [when asleep/after death], or he believes that 'Although it is not yet that way, I will convert it into being that way.' This being the case, it is proper to say that a fixed view of a self possessed of form and finite obsesses him.

[Similarly with each of the other views.] —*DN 15*

§12. "Monks, where there is a self, would there be (the thought), 'belonging to my self'?"

"Yes, lord."

"Or, monks, where there is what belongs to self, would there be (the thought), 'my self'?"

"Yes, lord."

"Monks, where a self or what belongs to self are not pinned down as a truth or reality, then the view-position—'This cosmos is the self. After death this I will be constant, permanent, eternal, not subject to change. I will stay just like that for an eternity'—Isn't it utterly & completely a fool's teaching?" — *MN 22*

§13. "Monks, I can imagine no one group of beings more variegated than that of common animals. Common animals are created by mind. And the mind is even more variegated than common animals. Thus one should reflect on one's mind with every moment: 'For a long time has this mind been defiled by passion, aversion, & delusion.' From the defilement of the mind are beings defiled. From the purification of the mind are beings purified." — *SN 22:100*

§14. "Just as a dog, tied by a leash to a post or stake, keeps running around and circling around that very post or stake; in the same way, an uninstructed, run-of-the-mill person—who has no regard for noble ones, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma; who has no regard for people of integrity, is not well-versed or disciplined in their Dhamma—assumes form to be the self, or the self as possessing form, or form as in the self, or the self as in form.

"He assumes feeling to be the self, or the self as possessing feeling, or feeling as in the self, or the self as in feeling.

"He assumes perception to be the self, or the self as possessing perception, or perception as in the self, or the self as in perception.

"He assumes fabrications to be the self, or the self as possessing fabrications, or fabrications as in the self, or the self as in fabrications.

"He assumes consciousness to be the self, or the self as possessing consciousness, or consciousness as in the self, or the self as in consciousness.

"He keeps running around and circling around that very form ... that very feeling... that very perception... those very fabrications... that very consciousness. He is not set loose from form, not set loose from feeling... from perception... from fabrications... not set loose from consciousness. He is not set loose from birth, aging, & death; from sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs. He is not set loose, I tell you, from suffering & stress." — *SN 22:99*

§15. "And why do you call it 'form' *(rūpa)*? Because it is afflicted *(ruppati)*, thus it is called 'form.' Afflicted with what? With cold & heat & hunger & thirst, with the touch of flies, mosquitoes, wind, sun, & reptiles. Because it is afflicted, it is called form.

"And why do you call it 'feeling'? Because it feels, thus it is called 'feeling.' What does it feel? It feels pleasure, it feels pain, it feels neither-pleasure-nor-pain. Because it feels, it is called feeling.

"And why do you call it 'perception'? Because it perceives, thus it is called 'perception.' What does it perceive? It perceives blue, it perceives yellow, it perceives red, it perceives white. Because it perceives, it is called perception.

"And why do you call them 'fabrications'? Because they fabricate fabricated things, thus they are called 'fabrications.' What do they fabricate as a fabricated thing? For the sake of form-ness, they fabricate form as a fabricated thing. For the sake of feeling-ness, they fabricate feeling as a

fabricated thing. For the sake of perception-hood... For the sake of fabrication-hood... For the sake of consciousness-hood, they fabricate consciousness as a fabricated thing. Because they fabricate fabricated things, they are called fabrications.

"And why do you call it 'consciousness'? Because it cognizes, thus it is called consciousness. What does it cognize? It cognizes what is sour, bitter, pungent, sweet, alkaline, non-alkaline, salty, & unsalty. Because it cognizes, it is called consciousness.

"Thus an instructed disciple of the noble ones reflects in this way: 'I am now being chewed up by form. But in the past I was also chewed up by form in the same way I am now being chewed up by present form. And if I delight in future form, then in the future I will be chewed up by form in the same way I am now being chewed up by present form.' Having reflected in this way, he becomes indifferent to past form, does not delight in future form, and is practicing for the sake of disenchantment, dispassion, and cessation with regard to present form."

[Similarly with feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness.] — *SN 22:79*

§16. "If one stays obsessed with form, monk, that's what one is measured by [*or:* limited to]. Whatever one is measured by, that's how one is classified.

"If one stays obsessed with feeling.... perception.... fabrications....

"If one stays obsessed with consciousness, that's what one is measured by. Whatever one is measured by, that's how one is classified.

"But if one doesn't stay obsessed with form, monk, that's not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn't measured by, that's not how one is classified.

"If one doesn't stay obsessed with feeling.... perception.... fabrications....

"If one doesn't stay obsessed with consciousness, that's not what one is measured by. Whatever one isn't measured by, that's not how one is classified." — *SN 22:36*

§17. The Blessed One said: "And which craving is the ensnarer that has flowed along, spread out, and caught hold, with which this world is smothered & enveloped like a tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, & bad destinations? These 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is internal and 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is external.

"And which are the 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is internal? There being 'I am,' there comes to be 'I am here,' there comes to be 'I am like this' ... 'I am otherwise' ... 'I am bad' ... 'I am good' ... 'I might be' ... 'I might be here' ... 'I might be like this' ... 'I might be otherwise' ... 'May I be' ... 'May I be here' ... 'May I be like this' ... 'May I be otherwise' ... 'I will be' ... 'I will be here' ... 'I will be like this' ... 'I will be otherwise.' These are the 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is internal.

"And which are the 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is external? There being 'I am because of this [or: by means of this],' there comes to be 'I am here because of this,' there comes to be 'I am like this because of this' ... 'I am otherwise because of this' ... 'I am bad because of this' ... 'I am good because of this' ... 'I might be because of this' ... 'I might be here because of this' ... 'I might be like this because of this' ... 'I might be otherwise because of this' ... 'May I be because of this' ... 'May I be here because of this' ... 'May I be like this because of this' ... 'May I be otherwise because of this' ... 'I will be because of this' ... 'I will be here because of this' ... 'I will be like this because of this' ... 'I will be otherwise because of this.' These are the 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is external.

"Thus there are 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is internal and 18 craving-verbalizations dependent on what is external. These are called the 36 craving-verbalizations. Thus, with 36 craving-verbalizations of this sort in the past, 36 in the future, and 36 in the present, there are 108 craving-verbalizations.

"This, monks is craving the ensnarer that has flowed along, spread out, and caught hold, with which this world is smothered & enveloped like a

tangled skein, a knotted ball of string, like matted rushes and reeds, and does not go beyond transmigration, beyond the planes of deprivation, woe, & bad destinations." — *AN 4:199*

§18. "Form, monks, is not-self. If form were self, this form would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible [to say] with regard to form, 'Let my form be thus. Let my form not be thus.' But precisely because form is not-self, this form lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible [to say] with regard to form, 'Let my form be thus. Let my form not be thus.'

"Feeling is not self....

"Perception is not self....

"Fabrications are not self....

"Consciousness is not-self. If consciousness were self, this consciousness would not lend itself to dis-ease. It would be possible [to say] with regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.' But precisely because consciousness is not-self, consciousness lends itself to dis-ease. And it is not possible [to say] with regard to consciousness, 'Let my consciousness be thus. Let my consciousness not be thus.'" — *SN 22:59*

§19. Now at that moment this line of thinking appeared in the awareness of a certain monk: "So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?"

Then the Blessed One, realizing with his awareness the line of thinking in that monk's awareness, addressed the monks: "It's possible that a senseless person—immersed in ignorance, overcome with craving—might think that he could outsmart the Teacher's message in this way: 'So—form is not-self, feeling is not-self, perception is not-self, fabrications are not-self, consciousness is not-self. Then what self will be touched by the actions done by what is not-self?' Now, monks, haven't I trained you in counter-questioning with regard to this & that topic here & there? What do you

think—Is form constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord." "And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?" "Stressful, lord." "And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'?" "No, lord."

"... Is feeling constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord" ....

"... Is perception constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord" ....

"... Are fabrications constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord" ....

"What do you think, monks—Is consciousness constant or inconstant?" "Inconstant, lord." "And is that which is inconstant easeful or stressful?" "Stressful, lord." "And is it fitting to regard what is inconstant, stressful, subject to change as: 'This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am'?" "No, lord."

"Thus, monks, any form whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every form is to be seen with right discernment as it has come to be: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

"Any feeling whatsoever....

"Any perception whatsoever....

"Any fabrications whatsoever....

"Any consciousness whatsoever that is past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near: Every consciousness is to be seen with right discernment as it has come to be: 'This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.'

"Seeing thus, the instructed disciple of the noble ones grows disenchanted with form, disenchanted with feeling, disenchanted with perception, disenchanted with fabrications, disenchanted with consciousness. Disenchanted, he becomes dispassionate. Through dispassion, he is released. With release, there is the knowledge, 'Released.' He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'"

That is what the Blessed One said. Gratified, the monks delighted in the

Blessed One's words. And while this explanation was being given, the minds of sixty monks, through lack of clinging, were fully released from fermentations. — *MN 109*

§20. "To what extent, Ānanda, does one assume when assuming a self? Assuming feeling to be the self, one assumes that 'Feeling is my self' [or] 'Feeling is not my self: My self is oblivious [to feeling]' [or] 'Neither is feeling my self, nor is my self oblivious to feeling, but rather my self feels, in that my self is subject to feeling.'

"Now, one who says, 'Feeling is my self,' should be addressed as follows: 'There are these three feelings, my friend—feelings of pleasure, feelings of pain, and feelings of neither pleasure nor pain. Which of these three feelings do you assume to be the self? At a moment when a feeling of pleasure is sensed, no feeling of pain or of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed. Only a feeling of pleasure is sensed at that moment. At a moment when a feeling of pain is sensed, no feeling of pleasure or of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed. Only a feeling of pain is sensed at that moment. At a moment when a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed, no feeling of pleasure or of pain is sensed. Only a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is sensed at that moment.

"Now, a feeling of pleasure is inconstant, fabricated, dependent on conditions, subject to passing away, dissolution, fading, and cessation. A feeling of pain is inconstant, fabricated, dependent on conditions, subject to passing away, dissolution, fading, and cessation. A feeling of neither pleasure nor pain is inconstant, fabricated, dependent on conditions, subject to passing away, dissolution, fading, and cessation. Having sensed a feeling of pleasure as 'my self,' then with the cessation of one's very own feeling of pleasure, 'my self' has perished. Having sensed a feeling of pain as 'my self,' then with the cessation of one's very own feeling of pain, 'my self' has perished. Having sensed a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain as 'my self,' then with the cessation of one's very own feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, 'my self' has perished.

"Thus he assumes, assuming in the immediate present a self inconstant,

entangled in pleasure and pain, subject to arising and passing away, he who says, 'Feeling is my self.' Thus in this manner, Ānanda, one does not see fit to assume feeling to be the self.

"As for the person who says, 'Feeling is not the self: My self is oblivious [to feeling],' he should be addressed as follows: 'My friend, where nothing whatsoever is sensed (experienced) at all, would there be the thought, "I am"?'"

"No, lord."

"Thus in this manner, Ānanda, one does not see fit to assume that 'Feeling is not my self: My self is oblivious [to feeling].'

"As for the person who says, 'Neither is feeling my self, nor is my self oblivious [to feeling], but rather my self feels, in that my self is subject to feeling,' he should be addressed as follows: 'My friend, should feelings altogether and every way stop without remainder, then with feeling completely not existing, owing to the cessation of feeling, would there be the thought, "I am"?'"

"No, lord."

"Thus in this manner, Ānanda, one does not see fit to assume that 'Neither is feeling my self, nor is my self oblivious [to feeling], but rather my self feels, in that my self is subject to feeling.'

"Now, Ānanda, in as far as a monk does not assume feeling to be the self, nor the self as oblivious, nor that 'My self feels, in that my self is subject to feeling,' then, not assuming in this way, he does not cling to anything in the world. Not clinging, he is not agitated. Unagitated, he is totally unbound right within. He discerns that 'Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.'

"If anyone were to say with regard to a monk whose mind is thus released that *'The Tathāgata exists after death,'* is his view, that would be mistaken; that *'The Tathāgata does not exist after death'* ... that '*The Tathāgata both exists and does not exist after death'* ... that *'The Tathāgata neither exists nor does not exist after death'* is his view, that would be mistaken. Why? Having directly known the extent of designation and the extent of the

objects of designation, the extent of expression and the extent of the objects of expression, the extent of description and the extent of the objects of description, the extent of discernment and the extent of the objects of discernment, the extent to which the cycle revolves: Having directly known that, the monk is released. The view that, 'Having directly known that, the monk released does not see, does not know,' would be mistaken." — *DN 15*

§21. "Even though a disciple of the noble ones has clearly seen with right discernment as it has come to be that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, still—if he has not attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful mental qualities, or something more peaceful than that—he can be tempted by sensuality. But when he has clearly seen with right discernment as it has come to be that sensuality is of much stress, much despair, & greater drawbacks, and he has attained a rapture & pleasure apart from sensuality, apart from unskillful mental qualities, or something more peaceful than that, he cannot be tempted by sensuality." — *MN 14*

§22. "Just as the royal frontier fortress has a gate-keeper—wise, experienced, intelligent—to keep out those he doesn't know and to let in those he does, for the protection of those within and to ward off those without; in the same way a disciple of the noble ones is mindful, highly meticulous, remembering & able to call to mind even things that were done & said long ago. With mindfulness as his gate-keeper, the disciple of the noble ones abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is blameless, and looks after himself with purity....

"Just as a royal frontier fortress has large stores of grass, timber & water for the delight, convenience, & comfort of those within, and to ward off those without; in the same way the disciple of the noble ones, quite secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful qualities, enters & remains in the first jhāna—rapture & pleasure born of seclusion, accompanied by directed thought & evaluation—for his own delight, convenience, & comfort, and to

alight on Unbinding.

"Just as a royal frontier fortress has large stores of rice & barley for the delight, convenience, & comfort of those within, and to ward off those without; in the same way the disciple of the noble ones, with the stilling of directed thoughts & evaluations, enters & remains in the second jhāna—rapture & pleasure born of concentration, unification of awareness free from directed thought & evaluation—internal assurance—for his own delight, convenience, & comfort, and to alight on Unbinding.

"Just as a royal frontier fortress has large stores of sesame, green gram, & other beans for the delight, convenience, & comfort of those within, and to ward off those without; in the same way the disciple of the noble ones, with the fading of rapture, remains equanimous, mindful, & alert, and senses pleasure with the body. He enters & remains in the third jhāna—of which the noble ones declare, 'Equanimous & mindful, he has a pleasant abiding'—for his own delight, convenience, & comfort, and to alight on Unbinding.

"Just as a royal frontier fortress has large stores of tonics—ghee, fresh butter, oil, honey, molasses, & salt—for the delight, convenience, & comfort of those within, and to ward off those without; in the same way the disciple of the noble ones, with the abandoning of pleasure & pain, as with the earlier disappearance of joy & distress, enters & remains in the fourth jhāna—purity of equanimity & mindfulness, neither-pleasure-nor-pain—for his own delight, convenience, & comfort, and to alight on Unbinding." — *AN 7:63*

§23. Not hoarding,
having comprehended food,
their pasture—emptiness
& freedom without sign:
their trail,
like that of birds through space,
can't be traced. — *Dhp 92*

§24. Ven. Ānanda: "'This body comes into being through conceit. And yet

it is by relying on conceit that conceit is to be abandoned.' Thus it was said. And in reference to what was it said? There is the case, sister, where a monk hears, 'The monk named such-and-such, they say, through the ending of the fermentations, has entered & remains in the fermentation-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now.' The thought occurs to him, 'The monk named such-&-such, they say, through the ending of the fermentations, has entered & remains in the fermentation-free awareness-release & discernment-release, having directly known & realized them for himself right in the here & now. Then why not me?' Then, at a later time, he abandons conceit, having relied on conceit." — *AN 4:159*

§25. "And what is the self as a governing principle? There is the case where a monk, having gone to a wilderness, to the foot of a tree, or to an empty dwelling, reflects on this: 'It's not for the sake of robes that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness; it's not for the sake of almsfood, for the sake of lodgings, or for the sake of this or that state of [future] becoming that I have gone forth from the home life into homelessness. Simply that I am beset by birth, aging, & death; by sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, & despairs; beset by stress, overcome with stress, [and I hope,] "Perhaps the end of this entire mass of suffering & stress might be known!" Now, if I were to seek the same sort of sensual pleasures that I abandoned in going forth from home into homelessness—or a worse sort—that would not be fitting for me.' So he reflects on this: 'My persistence will be aroused & not lax; my mindfulness established & not confused; my body calm & not aroused; my mind centered & unified.' Having made himself his governing principle, he abandons what is unskillful, develops what is skillful, abandons what is blameworthy, develops what is unblameworthy, and looks after himself in a pure way. This is called the self as a governing principle." — *AN 3:40*

§26. If, by forsaking
a limited ease,

he would see
an abundance of ease,
the enlightened man
would forsake
the limited ease
for the sake
of the abundant. — *Dhp 290*

§27. "Just as the footprints of all legged animals are encompassed by the footprint of the elephant, and the elephant's footprint is reckoned the foremost among them in terms of size; in the same way, all skillful qualities are rooted in heedfulness, converge in heedfulness, and heedfulness is reckoned the foremost among them." — *AN 10:15*

§28. I have heard that on one occasion the Blessed One was staying near Savatthi in Jeta's Grove, Anāthapiṇḍika's monastery. Now at that time King Pasenadi Kosala was together with Queen Mallikā in the upper palace. Then he said to her, "Mallikā, is there anyone more dear to you than yourself?"

"No, your majesty," she answered. "There is no one more dear to me than myself. And what about you, your majesty? Is there anyone more dear to you than yourself?"

"No, Mallikā. There is no one more dear to me than myself."

Then the king, descending from the palace, went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there, he said to the Blessed One: "Just now I was together with Queen Mallikā in the upper palace. I said to her, 'Is there anyone more dear to you than yourself?'

"'No, your majesty,' she answered. 'There is no one more dear to me than myself. And what about you, your majesty? Is there anyone more dear to you than yourself?'

"'No, Mallikā. There is no one more dear to me than myself.'"

Then, on realizing the significance of that, the Blessed One on that occasion exclaimed:

Searching all directions
with your awareness,
you find no one dearer
than yourself.
In the same way, others
are fiercely dear to themselves.
So you shouldn't hurt others
if you love yourself. — *Ud 5:1*

§29. Then Anāthapiṇḍika the householder went to the Blessed One and, on arrival, having bowed down to him, sat to one side. As he was sitting there the Blessed One said to him: "These five things, householder, are welcome, agreeable, pleasant, & hard to obtain in the world. Which five?

"Long life is welcome, agreeable, pleasant, & hard to obtain in the world.

"Beauty is welcome, agreeable, pleasant, & hard to obtain in the world.

"Happiness is welcome, agreeable, pleasant, & hard to obtain in the world.

"Status is welcome, agreeable, pleasant, & hard to obtain in the world.

"Rebirth in heaven is welcome, agreeable, pleasant, & hard to obtain in the world.

"Now, I tell you, these five things are not to be obtained by reason of prayers or wishes. If they were to be obtained by reason of prayers or wishes, who here would lack them? It's not fitting for the disciple of the noble ones who desires long life to pray for it or to delight in doing so. Instead, the disciple of the noble ones who desires long life should follow the path of practice leading to long life. In so doing, he will attain long life, either human or divine.

"It's not fitting for the disciple of the noble ones who desires beauty to pray for it or to delight in doing so. Instead, the disciple of the noble ones who desires beauty should follow the path of practice leading to beauty. In so doing, he will attain beauty, either human or divine.

"It's not fitting for the disciple of the noble ones who desires happiness

to pray for it or to delight in doing so. Instead, the disciple of the noble ones who desires happiness should follow the path of practice leading to happiness. In so doing, he will attain happiness, either human or divine.

"It's not fitting for the disciple of the noble ones who desires status to pray for it or to delight in doing so. Instead, the disciple of the noble ones who desires status should follow the path of practice leading to status. In so doing, he will attain status, either human or divine.

"It's not fitting for the disciple of the noble ones who desires rebirth in heaven to pray for it or to delight in doing so. Instead, the disciple of the noble ones who desires rebirth in heaven should follow the path of practice leading to rebirth in heaven. In so doing, he will attain rebirth in heaven." — *AN 5:43*

§30. "And what is right view? Right view, I tell you, is of two sorts: There is right view with fermentations, siding with merit, resulting in the acquisitions [of becoming]; and there is noble right view, without fermentations, transcendent, a factor of the path.

"And what is the right view that has fermentations, sides with merit, & results in acquisitions? 'There is what is given, what is offered, what is sacrificed. There are fruits & results of good & bad actions. There is this world & the next world. There is mother & father. There are spontaneously reborn beings; there are contemplatives & brahmans who, faring rightly & practicing rightly, proclaim this world & the next after having directly known & realized it for themselves.' This is the right view that has fermentations, sides with merit, & results in acquisitions.

"And what is the right view that is without fermentations, transcendent, a factor of the path? The discernment, the faculty of discernment, the strength of discernment, analysis of qualities as a factor for awakening, the path factor of right view *[all of these factors are equivalent to seeing experience in terms of the four noble truths]* in one developing the noble path whose mind is noble, whose mind is free from fermentations, who is fully possessed of the noble path. This is the right view that is without

fermentations, transcendent, a factor of the path." — *MN 117*

§31. "Monks, there are these seven treasures. Which seven? The treasure of conviction, the treasure of virtue, the treasure of shame, the treasure of compunction, the treasure of listening, the treasure of generosity, the treasure of discernment.

"And what is the treasure of conviction? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones has conviction, is convinced of the Tathāgata's awakening: 'Indeed, the Blessed One is worthy & rightly self-awakened, consummate in knowledge & conduct, well-gone, an expert with regard to the world, unexcelled as a trainer for those people fit to be tamed, the Teacher of divine & human beings, awakened, blessed.' This is called the treasure of conviction.

"And what is the treasure of virtue? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones abstains from taking life, abstains from stealing, abstains from illicit sexual conduct, abstains from lying, abstains from taking intoxicants that cause heedlessness. This, monks, is called the treasure of virtue.

"And what is the treasure of shame? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones feels shame at [the thought of engaging in] bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, mental misconduct. This is called the treasure of shame.

"And what is the treasure of compunction? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones feels compunction at [the suffering that would result from] bodily misconduct, verbal misconduct, mental misconduct. This is called the treasure of compunction.

"And what is the treasure of listening? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones has heard much, has retained what he/she has heard, has stored what he/she has heard. Whatever teachings are admirable in the beginning, admirable in the middle, admirable in the end, that—in their meaning & expression—proclaim the holy life that is entirely complete & pure: Those he/she has listened to often, retained, discussed, accumulated,

examined with his/her mind, and well-penetrated in terms of his/her views. This is called the treasure of listening.

"And what is the treasure of generosity? There is the case of a disciple of the noble ones, his awareness cleansed of the stain of stinginess, living at home, freely generous, openhanded, delighting in being magnanimous, responsive to requests, delighting in the distribution of alms. This is called the treasure of generosity.

"And what is the treasure of discernment? There is the case where a disciple of the noble ones is discerning, endowed with discernment of arising & passing away—noble, penetrating, leading to the right ending of stress. This is called the treasure of discernment.

"These, monks, are the seven treasures." — *AN 7:6*

§32. "And what is comprehension? Any ending of passion, ending of aversion, ending of delusion: This is called comprehension." — *SN 22:23*

§33. When you see with discernment,
'All fabrications are inconstant'...
'All fabrications are stressful'...
'All phenomena are not-self'—
you grow disenchanted with stress.
This is the path
to purity. — *Dhp 277-279*

§34. Then Ven. Khemaka [a non-returner], leaning on his staff, went to the elder monks and, on arrival, exchanged courteous greetings with them. After an exchange of friendly greetings & courtesies, he sat to one side. As he was sitting there, the elder monks said to him, "Friend Khemaka, this 'I am' of which you speak: What do you say 'I am'? Do you say, 'I am form,' or do you say, 'I am something other than form'? Do you say, 'I am feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness,' or do you say, 'I am something other than consciousness"? This 'I am' of which you speak: What do you say 'I am'?"

"Friends, it's not that I say 'I am form,' nor do I say 'I am something other than form.' It's not that I say, 'I am feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness,' nor do I say, 'I am something other than consciousness.' With regard to these five clinging-aggregates, 'I am' has not been overcome, although I don't assume that 'I am this.'

"It's just like the scent of a blue, red, or white lotus: If someone were to call it the scent of a petal or the scent of the color or the scent of a filament, would he be speaking rightly?"

"No, friend."

"Then how would he describe it if he were describing it rightly?"

"As the scent of the flower: That's how he would describe it if he were describing it rightly."

"In the same way, friends, it's not that I say 'I am form,' nor do I say 'I am other than form.' It's not that I say, 'I am feeling... perception... fabrications... consciousness,' nor do I say, 'I am something other than consciousness.' With regard to these five clinging-aggregates, 'I am' has not been overcome, although I don't assume that 'I am this.'

"Friends, even though a noble disciple has abandoned the five lower fetters, he still has with regard to the five clinging-aggregates a lingering residual 'I am' conceit, an 'I am' desire, an 'I am' obsession. But at a later time he keeps focusing on the phenomena of arising & passing away with regard to the five clinging-aggregates: 'Such is form, such its origin, such its disappearance. Such is feeling.... Such is perception.... Such are fabrications.... Such is consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance.' As he keeps focusing on the arising & passing away of these five clinging-aggregates, the lingering residual 'I am' conceit, 'I am' desire, 'I am' obsession is fully obliterated.

"Just like a cloth, dirty & stained: Its owners give it over to a washerman, who scrubs it with salt earth or lye or cow-dung and then rinses it in clear water. Now even though the cloth is clean & spotless, it still has a lingering residual scent of salt earth or lye or cow-dung. The washerman gives it to the owners, the owners put it away in a scent-infused wicker hamper, and

its lingering residual scent of salt earth, lye, or cow-dung is fully obliterated.

"In the same way, friends, even though a noble disciple has abandoned the five lower fetters, he still has with regard to the five clinging-aggregates a lingering residual 'I am' conceit, an 'I am' desire, an 'I am' obsession. But at a later time he keeps focusing on the phenomena of arising & passing away with regard to the five clinging-aggregates: 'Such is form, such its origin, such its disappearance. Such is feeling.... Such is perception.... Such are fabrications.... Such is consciousness, such its origin, such its disappearance.' As he keeps focusing on the arising & passing away of these five clinging-aggregates, the lingering residual 'I am' conceit, 'I am' desire, 'I am' obsession is fully obliterated."

When this was said, the elder monks said to Ven. Khemaka, "We didn't cross-examine Ven. Khemaka with the purpose of troubling him, just that (we thought) Ven. Khemaka is capable of declaring the Blessed One's message, teaching it, describing it, setting it forth, revealing it, explaining it, making it plain—just as he has in fact declared it, taught it, described it, set it forth, revealed it, explained it, made it plain."

That is what Ven. Khemaka said. Gratified, the elder monks delighted in his words. And while this explanation was being given, the minds of sixty-some monks, through no clinging, were fully released from fermentations —as was Ven. Khemaka's. — *SN 22:89*

§35. As he was sitting to one side, Ven. Kaccāyana Gotta said to the Blessed One: "Lord, 'Right view, right view,' it is said. To what extent is there right view?"

"By & large, Kaccāyana, this world is supported by [takes as its object] a polarity, that of existence & non-existence. But when one sees the origination of the world as it actually is with right discernment, 'non-existence' with reference to the world doesn't occur to one. When one sees the cessation of the world as it actually is with right discernment, 'existence' with reference to the world doesn't occur to one.

"By & large, Kaccāyana, this world is in bondage to attachments, clingings (sustenances), & biases. But one such as this doesn't get involved with or cling to these attachments, clingings, fixations of awareness, biases, or obsessions; nor is he resolved on 'my self.' He has no uncertainty or doubt that mere stress, when arising, is arising; stress, when passing away, is passing away. In this, his knowledge is independent of others. It's to this extent, Kaccāyana, that there is right view.

"'Everything exists': That is one extreme. 'Everything doesn't exist': That is a second extreme. Avoiding these two extremes, the Tathāgata teaches the Dhamma via the middle: From ignorance as a requisite condition come fabrications.

From fabrications as a requisite condition comes consciousness.

From consciousness as a requisite condition comes name-&-form.

From name-&-form as a requisite condition come the six sense media.

From the six sense media as a requisite condition comes contact.

From contact as a requisite condition comes feeling.

From feeling as a requisite condition comes craving.

From craving as a requisite condition comes clinging/sustenance.

From clinging/sustenance as a requisite condition comes becoming.

From becoming as a requisite condition comes birth.

From birth as a requisite condition, then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair come into play. Such is the origination of this entire mass of stress & suffering.

"Now from the remainderless fading & cessation of that very ignorance comes the cessation of fabrications. From the cessation of fabrications comes the cessation of consciousness. From the cessation of consciousness comes the cessation of name-&-form. From the cessation of name-&-form comes the cessation of the six sense media. From the cessation of the six sense media comes the cessation of contact. From the cessation of contact comes the cessation of feeling. From the cessation of feeling comes the cessation of craving. From the cessation of craving comes the cessation of

clinging/ sustenance. From the cessation of clinging/sustenance comes the cessation of becoming. From the cessation of becoming comes the cessation of birth. From the cessation of birth, then aging & death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, distress, & despair all cease. Such is the cessation of this entire mass of stress & suffering." — *SN 12:15*

§36. "'Consciousness without surface, endless, radiant all around, has not been experienced through the earthness of earth... the liquidity of liquid... the fieriness of fire... the windiness of wind... the allness of the all.'" — *MN 49*

§37. Ven. Nandaka: "Just as if a skilled butcher or butcher's apprentice, having killed a cow, were to carve it up with a sharp carving knife so that—without damaging the substance of the inner flesh, without damaging the substance of the outer hide—he would cut, sever, & detach only the skin muscles, connective tissues, & attachments in between. Having cut, severed, & detached the outer skin, and then covering the cow again with that very skin, if he were to say that the cow was joined to the skin just as it had been: Would he be speaking rightly?"

"No, venerable sir. Why is that? Because if the skilled butcher or butcher's apprentice, having killed a cow, were to... cut, sever, & detach only the skin muscles, connective tissues, & attachments in between; and... having covered the cow again with that very skin, then no matter how much he might say that the cow was joined to the skin just as it had been, the cow would still be disjoined from the skin."

"This simile, sisters, I have given to convey a message. The message is this: The substance of the inner flesh stands for the six internal media; the substance of the outer hide, for the six external media. The skin muscles, connective tissues, & attachments in between stand for passion & delight. And the sharp knife stands for noble discernment—the noble discernment that cuts, severs, & detaches the defilements, fetters, & bonds in between." — *MN 146*

§38. "There is the case where a monk has heard, 'All things are unworthy of attachment.' Having heard that all things are unworthy of attachment, he directly knows every thing. Directly knowing every thing, he comprehends every thing. Comprehending every thing, he sees all themes [all objects] as something separate.

"He sees the eye as something separate. He sees forms as something separate. He sees eye-consciousness as something separate. He sees eye-contact as something separate. And whatever arises in dependence on eye-contact—experienced either as pleasure, as pain, or as neither-pleasure-nor-pain—that too he sees as something separate.

"He sees the ear as something separate ....

"He sees the nose as something separate ....

"He sees the tongue as something separate ....

"He sees the body as something separate ....

"He sees the intellect as something separate. He sees ideas as something separate. He sees intellect-consciousness as something separate. He sees intellect-contact as something separate. And whatever arises in dependence on intellect-contact—experienced either as pleasure, as pain, or as neither-pleasure-nor-pain—that too he sees as something separate.

"This is how a monk knows, this is how a monk sees, so that ignorance is abandoned and clear knowing arises." — *SN 35:80*

§39. "Sensing a feeling of pleasure, one [after awakening] discerns that it is fleeting, not grasped at, not relished. Sensing a feeling of pain.... Sensing a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, one discerns that it is fleeting, not grasped at, not relished. Sensing a feeling of pleasure, one senses it disjoined from it. Sensing a feeling of pain.... Sensing a feeling of neither pleasure nor pain, one senses it disjoined from it." — *MN 140*

§40. *Upasīva:*

He who has reached the end:
    Does he not exist,

or is he for eternity
free from dis-ease?
Please, sage, declare this to me
as this phenomenon has been known by you.

The Buddha:

One who has reached the end
has no criterion / measure
by which anyone would say that—
for him it doesn't exist.
When all phenomena are done away with,
all means of speaking
are done away with as well. — *Sn 5:6*

§41. "What do you think, Anurādha: Do you regard form as the Tathāgata?"—"No, lord."

"Do you regard feeling as the Tathāgata?"—"No, lord."

"Do you regard perception as the Tathāgata?"—"No, lord."

"Do you regard fabrications as the Tathāgata?"—"No, lord."

"Do you regard consciousness as the Tathāgata?"—"No, lord."

"What do you think, Anurādha: Do you regard the Tathāgata as being in form? .... Elsewhere than form? .... In feeling? .... Elsewhere than feeling? .... In perception? .... Elsewhere than perception? .... In fabrications? .... Elsewhere than fabrications? .... In consciousness?.... Elsewhere than consciousness?" — "No, lord."

"What do you think: Do you regard the Tathāgata as form-feeling-perception-fabrications-consciousness?" — "No, lord."

"Do you regard the Tathāgata as that which is without form, without feeling, without perception, without fabrications, without consciousness?"— "No, lord."

"And so, Anurādha—when you can't pin down the Tathāgata as a truth or reality even in the present life—is it proper for you to declare, 'Friends, the Tathāgata—the supreme man, the superlative man, attainer of the

superlative attainment—being described, is described otherwise than with these four positions: The Tathāgata exists after death, does not exist after death, both does & does not exist after death, neither exists nor does not exist after death'?"

"No, lord."

"Very good, Anurādha. Very good. Both formerly & now, it is only stress that I describe, and the cessation of stress." — *SN 22:86*

§42. "In the same way, Vaccha, any form by which one describing the Tathāgata would describe him: That the Tathāgata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of existence, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of form, Vaccha, the Tathāgata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the sea. 'Reappears' doesn't apply. 'Does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Both does & does not reappear' doesn't apply. 'Neither reappears nor does not reappear' doesn't apply.

"Any feeling.... Any perception.... Any fabrication....

"Any consciousness by which one describing the Tathāgata would describe him: That the Tathāgata has abandoned, its root destroyed, made like a palmyra stump, deprived of the conditions of existence, not destined for future arising. Freed from the classification of consciousness, Vaccha, the Tathāgata is deep, boundless, hard to fathom, like the sea." — *MN 72*

§43. "Freed, dissociated, & released from ten things, Bahuna, the Tathāgata dwells with unrestricted awareness. Which ten? Freed, dissociated, & released from form, the Tathāgata dwells with unrestricted awareness. Freed, dissociated, & released from feeling.... Freed, dissociated, & released from perception.... Freed, dissociated, & released from fabrications .... Freed, dissociated, & released from consciousness.... Freed, dissociated, & released from birth.... Freed, dissociated, & released from aging.... Freed, dissociated, & released from death.... Freed, dissociated, & released from stress.... Freed, dissociated, & released from defilement, the Tathāgata dwells with unrestricted awareness.

"Just as a red, blue, or white lotus born in the water and growing in the water, rises up above the water and stands with no water adhering to it, in the same way the Tathāgata—freed, dissociated, & released from these ten things—dwells with unrestricted awareness." — *AN 10:81*

Glossary

Ajaan (Thai): Teacher; mentor.

Arahant: A "worthy one" or "pure one"; a person whose mind is free of defilement and thus not destined for further rebirth. A title for the Buddha and the highest level of his noble disciples.

Āsava: Fermentation; effluent. Four qualities—sensuality, views, becoming, and ignorance—that "flow out" of the mind and create the flood *(ogha)* of the round of death & rebirth.

Bhava: Becoming. A sense of identity within a particular world of experience. The three levels of becoming are on the level of sensuality, form, and formlessness.

Brahmā: An inhabitant of the higher heavenly realms of form or formlessness.

Brahman: A member of the priestly caste, which claimed to be the highest caste in India, based on birth. In a specifically Buddhist usage, "brahman" can also mean an arahant, conveying the point that excellence is based not on birth or race, but on the qualities attained in the mind.

Deva (devatā): Literally, "shining one." A being on the subtle levels of sensuality, form, or formlessness, living either in terrestrial or heavenly realms.

Dhamma: (1) Event; action; (2) a phenomenon in and of itself; (3) mental quality; (4) doctrine, teaching; (5) nibbāna (although there are passages describing nibbāna as the abandoning of all dhammas). Sanskrit form: *Dharma*.

Gotama: The Buddha's clan name.

Jhāna: Mental absorption. A state of strong concentration focused on a single sensation or mental notion.

Kamma: (1) Intentional action; (2) the results of intentional actions. Sanskrit form: *Karma*.

Khandha: Aggregate; physical and mental phenomena as they are directly experienced; the raw material for a sense of self: *rūpa*—physical form; *vedanā*—feelings of pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain; *saññā*—perception, mental label; *saṅkhāra*—fabrication, thought construct; and *viññāṇa*—sensory consciousness, the act of taking note of sense data and ideas as they occur. Sanskrit form: *Skandha*.

Nibbāna: Literally, the "unbinding" of the mind from passion, aversion, and delusion, and from the entire round of death and rebirth. As this term also denotes the extinguishing of a fire, it carries connotations of stilling, cooling, and peace. Sanskrit form: *Nirvāṇa*.

Pāli: The language of the oldest extant Canon of the Buddha's teachings.

Papañca: Objectification. Other possible translations for this term include complication, differentiation, elaboration, and proliferation.

Saṁyojana: Fetter. The ten fetters that bind the mind to the round of death and rebirth are (1) identity views, (2) uncertainty, (3) grasping at habits and practices, (4) sensual passion, (5) irritation, (6) passion for form, (7) passion for formlessness, (8) conceit, (9) restlessness, and (10) ignorance.

Saṅgha: 1) On the conventional *(sammati)* level, this term denotes the communities of Buddhist monks and nuns; 2) on the ideal *(ariya)* level, it denotes those followers of the Buddha, lay or ordained, who have attained at least stream-entry, the first stage of awakening.

Sutta: Discourse.

Tathāgata: Literally, one who has "become authentic *(tatha-āgata)*" or who is "truly gone *(tathā-gata)*": an epithet used in ancient India for a person who has attained the highest religious goal. In Buddhism, it usually denotes the Buddha, although occasionally it also denotes any of his arahant disciples.

Vinaya: The monastic discipline, whose rules and traditions comprise six volumes in printed text. The Buddha's own term for the religion he taught was, "This Dhamma-Vinaya."

Abbreviations

AN	*Aṅguttara Nikāya*
Dhp	*Dhammapada*
DN	*Dīgha Nikāya*
MN	*Majjhima Nikāya*
SN	*Saṁyutta Nikaya*
Sn	*Sutta Nipāta*
Ud	*Udāna*

References to DN and MN are to discourse *(sutta)*. Those to Dhp are to verse. References to other texts are to section (*saṁyutta, nipāta, or vagga)* and discourse. Numbering for AN and SN follows the Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon.

All translations from these texts are by the author, and are based on the Royal Thai Edition of the Pāli Canon (Bangkok: Mahāmakut Rājavidyālaya, 1982) and the BUDSIR IV edition of the Canon and Commentary produced by Mahidol University, Bangkok.

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